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**The Decolonizing Potential of Contemporary Aboriginal Art:**

**Jordan Abel's, Rebecca Belmore's, and Skawennati's Creative Cultural Re-productions**

**Le potentiel de décolonisation de l'art autochtone contemporain:**

**la reproduction culturelle créative de Jordan Abel, Rebecca Belmore et Skawennati**

Par

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## **COMPOSITION DU JURY**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis, “The Decolonizing Potential of Contemporary Aboriginal Art: Jordan Abel’s, Rebecca Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s Creative Cultural Re-productions,” investigates the power of contemporary Aboriginal art, to lead to the process of resurgence and sovereignty by looking at visual productions created by Jordan Abel, Rebecca Belmore, and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito. My research underlines Aboriginal artists’ abilities to transmit traditional cultural knowledge, as well as their creative resistance to ongoing settler colonialism within Turtle Island. Against colonial attempts to represent Indigenous peoples as a “vanished race,” I demonstrate that my selected artists’ political interventions against biased colonial history contribute to emphasizing Aboriginal “survivance” and indigenizing Western socio-cultural discourses and colonial representations in Aboriginal contexts. Within a comparative and interdisciplinary framework, Abel’s, Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s creative works act as cultural and social critiques that incorporate new narratives into ongoing Western-colonial paradigms. The artists I study highlight the relationships between literature, art, and new media technologies within the context of resurgence and decolonization. Abel’s erasure poetry, as it is derived from Western anthropological works, acts as a valuable medium to both unsettle colonial stereotypical images and ironically underline the presence of Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Belmore’s performance, centered on race, marginalization, and social injustice, function as political strategies for reconstructing Aboriginal self-determined identities and bringing about social change. And Skawennati’s new media artworks act as an effective medium for challenging dominant colonial ideologies and envisioning a sovereign future for Aboriginal communities.

I conclude by discussing the role of agency of my selected artists in the reconstruction of Canadian cultural memory. I illustrate how the combination of traditional storytelling and contemporary platforms offers a unique opportunity for Abel, Belmore, and Skawennati to bring

about change in the political, cultural, and archival memory of Canada and create new narratives in Canadian collective and cultural memory.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Aboriginal Art, Identity, Resurgence, Sovereignty, Decolonization, Performative Activism, Cultural Memory.

## Résumé

Ce mémoire, intitulé : «Le potentiel de Décolonisation de l'art autochtone contemporain: la reproduction culturelle créative de Jordan Abel, Rebecca Belmore et Skawennati», se penche sur le pouvoir de l'art autochtone contemporain dans le processus de résurgence et de souveraineté des Premières Nations en examinant les productions visuelles créées par Jordan Abel, Rebecca Belmore et Skawennati Tricia Fragnito. Ma recherche met en évidence la capacité des artistes autochtones à transmettre des connaissances culturelles traditionnelles, ainsi que leur résistance créative au colonialisme actuel à Turtle Island. Contre les tentatives coloniales de représenter les peuples autochtones comme une «race en voie de disparition», je démontre que les interventions politiques de mes artistes sélectionnés dans l'histoire coloniale contribuent à mettre l'accent sur la «survivance» des autochtones et à indigéniser l'histoire et les représentations sociales et culturelles occidentales dans les contextes autochtones. Dans un cadre comparatif et interdisciplinaire, j'affirme que les œuvres créatives d'Abel, de Belmore et de Skawennati agissent comme des critiques culturelles et sociales qui incorporent de nouveaux récits dans les paradigmes coloniaux actuels. Mes artistes choisis soulignent les relations entre la littérature, l'art et les nouvelles technologies médiatiques dans un contexte de résurgence et de décolonisation. La poésie d'effacement d'Abel, comme elle est tirée d'ouvrages anthropologiques occidentaux, fonctionne comme un moyen précieux pour à la fois perturber les images stéréotypées coloniales et souligner ironiquement la présence des peuples et des cultures autochtones. Les performances de Belmore, centrées sur la race, la marginalisation et les injustices sociales, agissent comme des stratégies politiques pour reconstruire les identités autodéterminées des autochtones et entraîner un changement social. Et les productions artistiques des nouveaux médias de Skawennati opèrent comme un moyen efficace de défier les idéologies dominantes coloniales et d'envisager un avenir souverain pour les communautés autochtones.

Je termine en discutant du rôle d'agentivité de mes artistes sélectionnés dans la reconstruction de la mémoire culturelle canadienne. J'illustre comment la combinaison des narrations traditionnelles et des plateformes contemporaines offre une occasion unique à Abel, Belmore et Skawennati de provoquer un changement dans la mémoire politique, officielle et archivistique du Canada et de créer de nouveaux récits dans la mémoire collective et culturelle canadienne.

**Mots-clés:** Art Autochtone Contemporain, Identité, Résurgence, Souveraineté, Décolonisation, Activisme performatif, Mémoire Culturelle.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	I
Abstract .....	II
Résumé .....	IV
List of Figures .....	VII
Introduction: .....	1
Chapter One: <u>I</u> nventive Intervention: Aboriginal Cultural Re-appropriation of Western-Colonial Texts .....	22
The Absent Presence .....	24
A Narrative Conquest .....	34
Chapter Two: <u>E</u> mbodiment of Knowledge: Performance Art and Activist Media in the Aboriginal Resurgence Movement .....	53
Anti-colonial Gestures and Political Protests within the Colonial State .....	55
Representing the Self, Cultural Representation .....	68
Chapter Three: <i>Tomorrow People</i> : Nurturing the Present, Harvesting the Future .....	86
Digital Storytelling .....	88
Mapping Out a New World .....	103
Conclusion: <u>H</u> onouring the Past, Thriving in the Future .....	114
Bibliography .....	123



## List of Figures:

Fig. 1. Jordan Abel. <i>The Place of Scraps</i> . Talonbooks, 2013. ....	37
Fig. 2. Jordan Abel. <i>The Place of Scraps</i> , Talonbooks, 2013. ....	37
Fig. 3. Jordan Abel. <i>The Place of Scraps</i> . Talonbooks, 2013. ....	38
Fig. 4. Jordan Abel. <i>The Place of Scraps</i> . Talonbooks, 2013. ....	39
Fig. 5. Jordan Abel. <i>The Place of Scraps</i> . Talonbooks, 2013. ....	42
Fig. 6. Jordan Abel. “20).” <i>Injun</i> . Talonbooks, 2016. ....	46

## Introduction:

### *The Indian in Transition: From Erasure to Sovereignty*

“It is my role as an artist to articulate the questions we should be asking.”

Rebecca Belmore, qtd. in *Native North American Art* 328

Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> art is not a recent concept. It has a long history among Aboriginal tribes and communities, though it has experienced rejuvenation in the contemporary period since the 1970s and 1980s. Contemporary Aboriginal art unmask the history of colonialism and Aboriginal “survivance”<sup>2</sup> and symbolizes the political and cultural revitalization of Aboriginal peoples. This idea is well demonstrated in *The Indian in Transition*, a very large mural created by the Anishinaabe painter Daphne Odjig in 1978, in which she “explored the capacity of visual art to give expression to Indigenous historical memory, and advanced a strong political and social agenda” (Berlo and Phillips 244). *The Indian in Transition* reflects the history of Aboriginal peoples before and after the contact with Europeans. It recounts the story of colonial oppression, persecution, hope, and resurgence. Lee Ann Martin, the Mohawk curator, states:

Odjig’s story unfolds with the figure on the left playing the drum, which symbolizes strong Aboriginal cultural traditions, while overhead is a protective Thunderbird. Then a boat arrives filled with pale-skinned people. The boat’s bow becomes a serpent, a bad omen in Anishnabe mythology. Next, Odjig depicts Aboriginal people trapped in a vortex of political, social, economic, and cultural change... Odjig ends the story as it began, with

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my thesis, I will use the word “Aboriginal” for the First Nations peoples of Canada and the terms “Indigenous” for American Indians as well as the Native nations of Australia and New Zealand.

<sup>2</sup> The compound word (survival + resistance) refers to the enactment of resistance of Aboriginal peoples who survive colonial atrocities; see Gerald Vizenor’s *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, pp. 1-39.

a message of hope and mutual understanding for the future. (qtd. in Berlo and Phillips 243)

Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips, in *Native North American Art*, underline the existence of Aboriginal art since the pre-contact period in stating that “long before the arrival of Europeans, the desire for exotic objects and materials for ceremonial and personal use had stimulated trade in raw materials and finished works of art across vast distances of the North American continent”

(6). Aboriginal art-making has existed since before the arrival of newcomers through material productions of wampum belts, drumming, dance performances, petroglyphs, and ceremony poles and transfer Aboriginal knowledge from generation to generation (Berlo and Phillips 18).

Geraldine Manossa, in “The Beginning of Cree Performance Culture,” asserts that, based on storytelling, Aboriginal art is a medium of sharing traditional cultural knowledge, humor, songs and dances, stating that “The collective manner through which knowledge, images, symbols, actions, and humour are shared from listener to listener and from storyteller to listener is where I believe the essence of Native performance arises” (176). Contemporary Aboriginal performance art, according to Manossa, is the reiteration and development of Aboriginal ancestral artistic sources that contribute to the recognition and reinforcement of Aboriginal cultures and worldviews (178-9). The arrival of Europeans on Turtle Island in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought fundamental changes to “Aboriginal concepts and styles of art” (Berlo and Phillips 6). To understand the situation of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada, it is thus crucial to examine the history of colonialism and its ongoing efforts in stereotyping and dehumanizing Aboriginal nations. In order to recognize the decolonial art-based practices of Aboriginal peoples including the revitalization of traditional storytelling and re-establishment of self-determination, ongoing settler-colonial policies of forcible assimilation, appropriation, silence, and ignorance need to be considered.

Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that, with “the intention of making a new home on [Aboriginal] land,” settler colonialism<sup>3</sup> has attempted to remove Aboriginal peoples from their traditional territories by employing different policies of assimilation, appropriation, and erasure (5). Since the first contact with Europeans, Aboriginal peoples have been the target of violence, racism, and misrepresentation. Massacres, poverty, starvation, and the spread of diseases were some of the colonial practices in reducing the Aboriginal population.<sup>4</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, much of the Aboriginal ancestral territories were governed by settler-European powers and colonized peoples suffered from traumatic experiences of assimilation and dehumanization. “During this period,” as Peter Iverson and Wade Davies argue, “there were attempts to assimilate Indians into the mainstream of American [and Canadian] society through enforced changes in land ownership and land use, schooling, and religious belief” (6). The establishment of the Indian residential school system (1876-1996), with the purpose of assimilating Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal culture and of controlling the future of Aboriginal communities, was just one of the political strategies employed by colonial states in

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<sup>3</sup> I prefer the expression of “settler colonialism”, in place of simple colonization, as settler Europeans enacted violence and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples, lands, and cultures by occupying and landing in Aboriginal traditional territories. Mishuana Goeman states: “Settler colonialism is a useful term in relation to performance as it connotes the ongoing condition of settler occupation of Native land, an occupation so often pictured, monumentalized, and enforced by the containment of Native bodies and glorification of a colonial past. Settler colonial societies not only seek to eliminate Native peoples either through genocide or disavowal, but also set up structures that support their territorial claims; invasion as a structure ‘erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base’. These images ... became the structure by which Native peoples continue to be viewed as emotionless tragic figures” (Goeman, “Introduction to Indigenous Performances” 4).

<sup>4</sup> Wesley-Esquimaux, in “Trauma to Resilience: Notes on Decolonization” states: “Several studies of the indigenous population in the years immediately following contact in 1492 have emphasized the biological and cultural catastrophes that occurred... In 1492, an estimated 90 million to 112 million indigenous people lived on the American continents... Death and destruction came quickly, and, by 1493, in the southern hemisphere, the first point of contact, the Native population of San Salvador and its neighboring island Hispaniola was completely devastated by the first influenza epidemic. within two generations, smallpox had completely destroyed one-third to one-half of the indigenous population of the American continents, and, until at least 1918, various epidemics devastated the lives of indigenous people across the continents, with some reaching as far north as Alaska and west to British Colombia... 90 to 95 percent of the indigenous population was wiped out by epidemic disease, warfare, and famine, with most people dying within 100 years of contact” (14).

eliminating “Indianness” that significantly influenced and devastated children’s Native identities. Under the pretext of “civilizing,” Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and reserves and sent to boarding schools. Physical abuse in these schools, changing children’s names, or calling them by numbers, as well as preventing children to speak in their traditional language led to dehumanization and engendered cultural rupture. Although residential schools were closed in the 1990s, the traumatic impact of these schools have affected many of the survivors for the rest of their lives and various forms of physical, mental, and sexual abuse endured by Aboriginal children in residential schools need lifelong healing.<sup>5</sup>

Aboriginal traditional stories and cultural values have been represented in distorted ways throughout the history of colonization on Turtle Island. Aboriginal peoples are often represented as “the Other,” and their voices have been consciously ignored. Greg Young-Ing argues: “From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, and literary writers made reference to Aboriginal Peoples as an inferior vanishing race in a manner which is degrading and offensive to most Aboriginal Peoples” (“Aboriginal Text in Context” 233). Aboriginal stories have been obscured and Aboriginal knowledge has been deliberately erased through non-Aboriginal interpretations. Representing Aboriginal peoples as “primitive” and “vanishing” provides the space for “the material theft of Native lands, erosion of sovereignty, and eradication of Native peoples” (Goeman, “Introduction to Indigenous Performances” 8). Under the destructive impact of settler colonialism, Aboriginal peoples have been excluded from socio-cultural contexts; they have lost their autonomy, self-sufficiency, and self-governance and were led to marginal positions by external political control. Western ideology, based on racist and

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<sup>5</sup> See Isabelle Knockwood’s *Out of the depths: The Experiences of Mi’kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* pp. 158-60.

patriarchal concepts, established the assumed superiority of settler-Europeans and the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples.

In the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, along with the establishment of the academic discipline of anthropology, an exaggerated fascination towards Aboriginal art and cultures had come into being among Western academics. In place of giving the chance to Aboriginal peoples to explain their art and worldview, Aboriginal cultures had been considered as the objects of research by Western-colonial anthropologists and historians. Under the pretext of preserving Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal artworks were removed from Aboriginal peoples and transferred to museums. Janet Berlo and Ruth Phillips state:

Native-made objects came to be regarded as specimens that could be studied scientifically to reveal information about the technological development, belief systems, and practices of their makers. Ethnological collectors assembled huge quantities of Native North American material in museums newly built to receive them... Like their contemporaries, early anthropologists also accepted the widespread view that Indigenous arts and cultures inevitably became corrupted and weakened by contact with Europeans and were doomed to vanish as modernization proceeded. Such evolutionist studies were used to support laws and policies designed by the American and Canadian governments to assimilate Indigenous peoples into settler societies and erase their languages and cultures. (8)

Gerald Vizenor argues that Western academics have attempted to “discover” and represent Aboriginal cultures, which produced “exotic and ethnographic portraits of natives” (“Fugitive poses” 161).<sup>6</sup> Given that Western anthropological (mis)representations are based on colonial

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Francis, in *The Imaginary Indian*, deals with the image of Aboriginal peoples and cultures called Indian created by the settler European culture and argues: “The Indian began as a White man’s mistake, and became a White man’s fantasy. Through the prism of White hopes, fears and prejudices, indigenous Americans would be seen to have lost contact with reality and to have become ‘Indians’; that is, anything non-Natives wanted them to be” (5).

policies of assimilation, stereotypical images have been imposed on Aboriginal cultures by representing them as bloody, squaw, dirty, savage, and uncivilized. By the same token, in “Negotiating Space for Aboriginal Art,” Lee-Ann Martin deals with ongoing acts of marginalization, exclusion, and ignorance of Aboriginal contemporary arts. She argues that, in the post-residential schools’ era, Aboriginal art has “been defined (and devalued) in opposition to Western systems of classification; that is, they are seen as artifacts rather than art, as craft rather than fine art, as primitive rather than modern” (240). As powerful voices of cultural expression, revitalization, and resurgence, contemporary Aboriginal art is deliberately ignored by new strategies of ongoing colonialism implemented through educational institutions, social media, and cyberspace. “Even during a time of reconciliation,” in Jessica Deer’s terms, “Indigenous people are faced with having to defend their identities from being mocked, used as a trend of form of entertainment every single day. The highly inaccurate and dehumanizing representations of Indigenous peoples in sports, on television, on the runway, or in costumes on the shelves of a Halloween store shape much of what people know and think about us” (61). There are still Aboriginal peoples who hide their Indigenous identity because of stereotypical images that dominate the public mind. Andrea Bear Nicholas, in “The Assault on Aboriginal Oral Traditions,” asserts that “Indigenous Peoples in North America are still massively dispossessed, not only of their lands, but also of their forms of life and traditions, including their right to make critical decisions for their lives and their futures” (23).

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Settler artists such as George Catlin (American painter, 1796-1872), Paul Kane (Canadian-Irish painter, 1810-1871), Edward Curtis (American photographer, 1868-1952), and Emily Carr (Canadian painter, 1871-1945) by representing “the classic Indian head in feather headdress or the Indian princess in beaded doeskin,” rather than representing the reality of Aboriginal cultures, contributed to situating Aboriginal peoples in the distant past and romanticizing them in order to create an advertising image of the vanished cultures (Francis 176). Gerald Vizenor also considers “indian” as a colonial invention. According to Vizenor “indian” becomes a means of concealing colonial surveillance: “The *indian* is a simulation, not a trace; the *indian* has no referent, a counterfeit culture of a native absence and the remission of surveillance” (Vizenor, “Penenative Rumors” 26).

When Aboriginal peoples internalize and accept colonial representations, oppressors are empowered and ultimately create a hegemonic society within which the realities of history have been always hidden.<sup>7</sup> As long as Aboriginal peoples believe their imposed inferior position, no change will occur. Critical questions have thus arisen around the authenticity of non-Aboriginal and Eurocentric representations. Aboriginal writers and artists have thenceforth attempted to rescue their artworks as cultural expressions from settler misrepresentation. In the early 1970s, as Garnet Armand Ruffo argues, a kind of “renaissance” or “rebirth” took place in Aboriginal cultural productions (5). Aboriginal poetry, novels, and autobiography were created by Aboriginal writers and published by settler publishers. The process of recognition actively started up as Aboriginal publications “[came] directly out of the Oral Tradition” and made “a sense of self-awareness” (Ruffo 6-7). “This period,” according to Iverson and Davies, “witnessed new forms of activism and persistent campaigns to gain greater self-determination and sovereignty” (Iverson and Davies 7). Iverson and Davies underline new guises for re-valORIZING Aboriginal cultures and identities, and state:

Native people wrestled with central matters relating to identity. Indians also attempted to gain more control over their water, their economies, and their education. In literature, art, and history, Indian perspectives had major effect. In the course of a generation, termination was overcome and a new route charted toward the Native future. (154)

Aboriginal artists have since challenged social injustices against their peoples and attempted to “reveal and undo the hierarchies of race, class, and gender embedded in the classic narratives and canons of Western art history” (Berlo and Phillips 14). Aboriginal artists have denounced political representations of colonial governments and, through counter-discourse, created a

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<sup>7</sup> See Mark Tappan’s “Reframing Internalized Oppression and Internalized Domination: From the Psychological to the Sociocultural”, pp. 2118-22.



revolution in Aboriginal representations by emphasizing the production and interpretation of Aboriginal art through Aboriginal voices as “a unique mode of cultural expression” (Young-Ing, “Aboriginal Text in Context” 238). Aboriginal art has contributed to the cultural renewal and reconstruction of self-determination by retaining traditional storytelling as a major source of inspiration, and artists and writers have returned to the past in order to “express Indigenous identities, cultural traditions, and historical memory at a critical moment in their history when their survival and preservation were threatened by the intensification of pressure to assimilate” (Berlo and Phillips 249). More recently, Daphne Odjig (Odawa-Potawatomi painter), Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki filmmaker and activist), Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Métis/Shoshone visual artist and curator), James Luna (Payómkawichum performance artist), Shelley Niro (Mohawk filmmaker and photographer), Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe interdisciplinary artist), Dana Claxton (Hunkpapa artist), Skawennati Tricia Fragnito (Mohawk new media artist), and Jordan Abel (Nisga’a visual poet) are just some of the many Aboriginal artists that have brought alternative perspectives to North American visual art history by representing Aboriginal stories using new and creative artistic frameworks. Aboriginal art-making and resurgence are thus intertwined movements. Contemporary Aboriginal art productions contribute to the movements of self-representation and resurgence, healing and revitalization of Aboriginal diminishing knowledge, languages, and cultures by restoring Aboriginal hi/story<sup>8</sup> and knowledge and exploring connections between traditional Aboriginal and historical “Indian” identities.

Lee-Ann Martin, in “Wordplay: Issues of Authority and Territory,” emphasizes the necessity of restoring Aboriginal knowledge for achieving sovereignty and self-determination in the future in stating that “Our retelling will necessarily privilege Indigenous insights, values,

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<sup>8</sup> Hi/story is the compilation of the two words of history and story. I prefer to use the integrated form of these words in my thesis as, in Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal history is based on Aboriginal oral stories. See Thomas King’s *The Truth About Stories*.

practices, and ways of knowing. We must reflect back our stories, to see ourselves more firmly in the world so that we can dream the future” (107). Neal McLeod, in “Coming Home Through Stories,” argues that Aboriginal peoples became alien and exotic in their homeland and that their cultures have been destroyed by the dominant state through the process of alienation and eviction from traditional lands, stories, and languages that he calls “Spatial and ideological diaspora” (19). In order to release “[t]he effect of being in exile and the trauma associated with it,” (31) and to “anchor ourselves in the world” (33) McLeod proposes that Aboriginal peoples can “come home through stories”:

Stories act as the vehicles of cultural transmission by linking one generation to the next.

There are many levels to the stories, and many functions to them: they link the past to the present, and allow the possibility of cultural transmission and of “coming home” in an ideological sense. Our task today is to retrieve tribal narratives and paradigms, and to reaffirm our tribal identities in the face of the overwhelming pressure of diaspora (31).

Aboriginal art is inspired by Aboriginal cosmology and the spiritual world<sup>9</sup> and, as Berlo and Phillips argue, “no hard line can be drawn between spiritual and social practices in Native North American art” (33). Aboriginal art, as cultural expressions, represent Aboriginal world-views that participate politically in the socio-cultural process of reconstructing Aboriginal identity.

Mishuana R. Goeman, in “Disrupting a Settler-Colonial of Place,” deals with the intersection of Aboriginal cosmology, art, and land in stating:

As Indigenous people, we have always explored and developed through visual and literary aesthetics our complex philosophical understandings of the world around us, and our

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<sup>9</sup> See Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, pp. 28-33.

relationships to other beings. ... How we have come to see land and water are closely linked to how we see ourselves and others and how we engage the world. (235)

Contemporary Aboriginal art, “as a fundamental component of a unique, non-European national identity and aesthetic,” in Leslie Dawn’s words, attempts to “preserve, rather than to destroy, Native culture; and to create a market for current artistic production and cultural expression” (238). Contemporary Aboriginal art exhibitions highlight Aboriginal protests against confining Aboriginal art and culture to the past and museums, and the need to authenticate “the vitality of [Aboriginal] culture, the continuity of their traditional ceremonies, and their claims to their territories, ...by continuing traditional ceremonies and by protesting other social and legal injustices” (Dawn 242). In this sense, I argue that Aboriginal art-based activism plays a significant role in the processes of healing, re-humanization, and decolonization by revitalizing traditional Aboriginal knowledge and stories. That is to say, contemporary Aboriginal art is “an extraordinary story of survival” contributing to making visible the invisible and marginalized group through cultural production and resurgence (Berlo and Phillips 3).

Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill and Sophie McCall, in the introduction to *The Land We Are: Artists and Writers Unsettle the Politics of Reconciliation*, emphasize art as the prominent avenue that contributes to radical re-imagination of the future and re-evolution of the complex discourse of reconciliation in terms of decolonization or “closure” of colonialism (2).<sup>10</sup> According to Hill and McCall, “art-based” decolonization practices “contribute to ideological shifts, promote

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<sup>10</sup> Reconciliation, as L’Hirondelle and McCall argue, is a “contested terrain” by Aboriginal artists and writers since, due to ongoing colonialism, Aboriginal peoples are still excluded from “land rights or restitution” in the postcolonial era (1-2). The concept of reconciliation differs in settler and Aboriginal interpretations. To “achieve legal certainty” Canada wants Aboriginal peoples to forget past traumatic experiences, while reconciliation from an Aboriginal perspective foregrounds Aboriginal “resurgence and redress” and the reclamation of the lands and governance of traditions (7). Glen Sean Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks*, deals with Canada’s political understanding of reconciliation based on “rendering consistent Indigenous assertions of nationhood with the state’s unilateral assertion of sovereignty over Native peoples’ lands and populations” in place of the restoration of Aboriginal rights and lands (107).

dialogue, and even to heal, as well as to create productive sites of discomfort, disconnection, and disruption” (13). Aboriginal art productions are considered as “Aboriginal sovereign display territories” through which “historically entrenched roles are consciously challenged and re-imagined” (13). Michelle Raheja highlights the importance of articulating Aboriginal sovereignty through art outside of an academic framework:

[T]o engage deeply in process of decolonization, it is critical to insist on a much broader notion of sovereignty that takes seriously the importance of sovereignty as it is expressed intellectually, politically, socially, and individually (I would even add therapeutically) in cultural forms as diverse as dance, film, theatre, the plastic arts, literature, and even hip-hop and graffiti. (28)

To attain a sovereign future, she continues, “we must continue to encourage conversations that maintain spaces for articulations of sovereignty in the arts” (31).

Accordingly, I argue that art is a powerful mode of activism. The political motivations of artists emerge from within their artworks and can influence the thoughts, emotions, and ultimately the (re)actions of audiences. An important element to art, and especially visual representations, is that there is not any one fixed definition to describe it.<sup>11</sup> Many interpretations can be made of a single work; different audiences interpret a single image in different ways. It can, therefore, challenge the audience’s opinion on socio-political issues and provoke new realities in collective and cultural memory. With this in mind, I assert that using art as a medium of protest can itself provide space for the agency and strategies of self-determination of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal art-making has the potential to bring marginalized Aboriginal communities back to the public sphere and re-humanize them from their colonial oppression by

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<sup>11</sup> “The definition of ‘art’ is highly unstable, changing from one culture and time period to another” (Berlo and Phillips 15).

connecting Aboriginal history to their active presence today on Turtle Island to create a sovereign future.

My thesis specifically deals with Aboriginal artist-storytellers and examines how their art productions act as creative activism in the process of Aboriginal resurgence and decolonization. I demonstrate that Aboriginal performative practices based on the notion of storytelling are political weapons that underline Aboriginal presence in the present and re-create Aboriginal identities and sovereignty in the future. Through a textual framework, my research focuses on analyzing innovative contemporary Aboriginal visual productions and political representations within the dominant settler-colonial society in order to “challenge and change the place of Native people in the art world and contemporary society” (Berlo and Phillips 3). The corpus of my thesis concerns Aboriginal art-based resistance by examining creative visual productions by three contemporary Aboriginal artists: Jordan Abel; Rebecca Belmore; and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito. My selected artists and writers creatively address ongoing colonial violence, oppression, and social injustice against Aboriginal peoples, while also tracing connections between contemporary Aboriginal resistance and the future sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples. Along the three creative paths of visual poetry, performance art, and new media art, I propose that the re-production of traditional storytelling contributes to Aboriginal resurgence and self-determination. Through a study of Abel’s, Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s artistic perspectives, this thesis explores how the artists’ innovative practices act as weapons of decolonization by subverting stereotypical images, revitalizing Aboriginal hi/stories, indigenizing the non-Aboriginal landscape, and reconstructing Aboriginal self-determination.

To this end, the first chapter of my project is devoted to Nisga'a<sup>12</sup> poet Jordan Abel's textual/pictorial poetry collections, where he reveals the cultural and physical erasure of Aboriginal peoples within Western-colonial historical and socio-political texts. Born and raised in Vancouver, a city with "a rich history of visual poetry," Abel's literary and artistic practices were shaped by the city's poetic history and led him towards academic study in the field of literature, especially conceptual writing and erasure poetry (Betts and Bök, "A Line Can Be Drawn: An Interview" 295). He is the author of three collections of poetry focusing on the re-appropriation of Aboriginal culture: *The Place of Scraps* (2013), *Un/inhabited* (2014), and *Injun* (2016).

Inspired by his ancestral craft of wood carving, Abel is a text carver. He scrapes Western-colonial texts and novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries until his desired meanings emerge. Abel's creative practice of erasure addresses biased Western literary and anthropological discourses and interrogates policies of assimilation and appropriation used by the dominant state to erase Aboriginal peoples' lives and cultures. Erasure, in Derrida's interpretation, is a critical way of being and thinking that can be employed to explore other precise and meaningful conceptions without denying the existence/reality of the original text (*Of Grammatology* xxxvi). According to Sonnet L'Abbé, erasure poetry is "composed by deleting, erasing, or hiding text from a source-work" (199). L'Abbé's definition of erasure poetry reveals two main features of the genre: first materiality and visuality; and second literary iteration and appropriation. In the same way, Abel explores the potential of language to reveal the truth hidden beneath the political documents of

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<sup>12</sup> Nisga'a is one of the First Nations communities in the Northwest coast. Nisga'a peoples mainly live in the Nass River Valley in British Columbia. Before the arrival of settlers, just like all other Aboriginal nations, the Nisga'a had its own traditional government based on a strong spiritual relationship with the land and animals. However, since the 1860s the Nisga'a nation has encountered fundamental changes brought about by colonial governance and Nisga'a ceremony poles, symbols of Nisga'a culture, were removed and transferred to museums. (see *Nisga'a: People of the Mighty River*, 1992).

settler states, to decolonize stereotypical images, and to re-appropriate Nisga'a culture and, by extension, Aboriginal knowledge and cultures. Looking at the intersections of images and words, Abel's works contribute to removing stereotypical representations from Aboriginal peoples in order to re-humanize them from within mainstream anthropological discourses. The empty places in Abel's poems, on the one hand, reveal colonial policies of silencing Aboriginal voices and, on the other hand, ironically emphasize the presence of Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Abel navigates Canadian history in new and opposing directions to those of mainstream, academic, and historical beliefs about Aboriginal peoples.

In *The Place of Scraps*, Abel's visual-prose poems are inspired directly from the Canadian anthropologist Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles* (1950). Abel re-writes Barbeau's words in an Aboriginal interpretation to demonstrate that the Nisga'a nation and culture were misrepresented and their values and perspectives were purposely decontextualized in Barbeau's texts. Although the subject of Barbeau's work is Nisga'a culture, there is no trace of the Nisga'a perspective in Barbeau's text. Abel contests the object-position of Nisga'a culture as the Nisga'a nation and culture are the subject of Barbeau's research. Focusing on *The Place of scraps*, I argue that Abel uses his ancestral art of carving to re-contextualize Marius Barbeau's anthropological texts. Considering Barbeau's text as a piece of wood, Abel's creative practice of "word-carving" (L'Abbé 198) shapes his truth that "we are still here. ... We did not disappear. And we can find ways to respond" (Betts and Bök, "A Line Can Be Drawn: An Interview" 292). Abel's criticism of Barbeau's texts reveals the impact of colonial anthropology in destroying and removing Aboriginal art and cultures, and challenges Western anthropology as one of the main contributors to Aboriginal cultural rupture. Also, in *Injun*, Abel ironically uses the erasure method to sweep colonial stereotypical images out from Aboriginal culture. His poems are directly borrowed from Western-colonial texts, and at the same time, are free from European influences. By preserving

and highlighting some words and removing others of Western-colonial texts, Abel demonstrates that Eurocentric discourses were fed with Aboriginal art and culture(s) without acknowledging them. His purposeful acts of erasing settler-colonial discourses talk back to colonizers' attempts to remove Aboriginal peoples and culture(s). Abel's political intervention in Western-colonial novels and his re-examination of settler-colonial texts contribute to revealing the distinction between representational history and reality. His direct use of colonial-historical texts not only ensures the authenticity of Abel's works, but also provides the opportunity to directly interrogate colonial strategies of Aboriginal erasure. I assert that Abel's analogy of Nisga'a pole carving intentionally unsettles settler-colonial texts to re-appropriate Aboriginal lands and cultures and re-construct Aboriginal self-representation.

I will demonstrate that Abel's erasure poetry substantiates one of the most important functions of Aboriginal poetry, which is, as Warren Cariou argues, "to help decolonize the imagination by bridging the ideological boundaries that often separate the beneficiaries of colonialism from those who are objectified and impoverished by it" (qtd. in McLeod, *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* 6). With reference to Steve McCaffrey's theories of conceptual writing as well as Sonnet L'Abbé's ideas about the role of erasure poetry in Aboriginal literature, I examine how Abel's creative technique of erasure metaphorizes the deliberate erasure and ignorance of Aboriginal peoples and cultures and how blank spaces connote the forcible absence and silence of Aboriginal communities. I argue that Abel's multidimensional poems (as his poems derived from the combination of art, literature, and technology) look at the intersection of the method, content, and individual originality to unpack the hidden history of Canada.

The second chapter of my thesis engages with Rebecca Belmore's performative activism. Rebecca Belmore is an Anishinaabe performance artist who was born in Sioux Lookout and grew up in Upsala, Ontario, near Thunder Bay. In order to be accepted by settler Canadian society,



Belmore's mother kept her away from the Anishinaabe language and traditional lifestyle. However, spending summers with her grandmother on the Lac Seul reserve during her school years had a great impact on (re-)constructing Belmore's Aboriginal worldview. Belmore's grandmother resisted speaking in English and only spoke in Anishinaabemowin. The communication between Belmore and her grandmother, rather than language and verbal relation, was predominantly based on non-verbal and body language, which eventually influenced Belmore's move towards performance art. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design, Belmore participated in several solo as well as group exhibitions underlining themes of history, memory, colonialism, culture, and identity; including *Land Spirit Power*, presented by National Gallery of Canada, Ontario in 1992, *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby*, Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1995, the solo exhibition *Rebecca Belmore: The Named and the Unnamed* arranged by the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver in 2002. In 2005, Belmore was chosen by Canada Council as Canada's official representative to perform her work *Fountain* at the Venice Biennale exhibition.

Performance art acts as a powerful medium for Belmore to directly address ongoing colonial policies of assimilation and appropriation, and verbalize the pain, racism, violence, and socio-cultural injustices imposed upon Aboriginal bodies.<sup>13</sup> Belmore's silent body vocalizes and embodies Western-colonial "crimes against the body, the native body, the woman's body" (Berlo and Phillips 340). In *Fountain*, Belmore responds to colonial assumptions of disappearing and vanishing Aboriginal peoples and cultures cultivated and propagated by mainstream discourses.

Belmore reminds viewers that despite the colonial practices of erasure and assimilation,

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<sup>13</sup> Qwo-Li Driskill argues: "Colonization is a kinesthetic reality: it is an act done by bodies and felt by other bodies... It is both our homelands and our bodies that are violated through colonization... We carry wounds of the past in our bodies, and it is through our bodies that we find ways to mend them and continue our lifeways... It is our bodies—and as bodies—that we tell our stories and understand what it means to be Native people enacting decolonization and continuance" (Driskill 155).

Aboriginal peoples did not vanish; they have survived and resisted colonialism. The themes of memory and colonialism are also represented in Belmore's *Vigil*. Based on the remembrance of missing and murdered Aboriginal women at Gore and Cordova Street in downtown Vancouver, *Vigil* re-enacts colonial violence and patriarchal discrimination against Aboriginal women and articulates the suppressed voice of Aboriginal women as the most marginalized group of Canadian society because of both their sex and Aboriginal origin. Belmore's *Vigil* is a provocative performance that calls viewers to witness colonial atrocities against Aboriginal bodies and cultures. Belmore performs her works in public sites in direct view of audiences in order to put emphasis on the presence of Aboriginal art. Her practices are protests against confining Aboriginal art productions to museums and situating Aboriginal peoples in the past. Moreover, as a form of testimony, Belmore's performances invite both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to judge and take action in the process of decolonization. I argue that Belmore's use of meaningful spaces and materials raises questions about racism and socio-political discrimination to generate alternative visions on the authenticity of "official" Canadian history. Belmore challenges colonial history and creates a new epistemology of Aboriginal culture in the social and collective memory. I will also address how Belmore's performances and installations act as political practices embodying Aboriginal resistance, resurgence, and self-determination. I explore how Belmore recalls past stories to unfold the buried part of history deliberately hidden by mainstream colonial society. Belmore's embodied re-remembering of Aboriginal stories and historical events examines colonial social injustices, accelerates the healing process, and creates new meanings in the concept of Aboriginal identity. Belmore's bodily movements create a new face of Aboriginal identity, different from stereotypical identities made by the dominant colonial culture. Belmore's self-portraits re-represent Aboriginal hi/stories and underline the importance of self-representation among Aboriginal communities. Her

performances and installations reimagine collective Aboriginal stories and participate in the process of recognition, re-identification, and resurgence. In other words, Belmore's self-identity metaphorizes Aboriginal collective selves. In this regard, I argue that Belmore's work offers agency to Aboriginal communities, and her practices, by altering the assumption of "Indian" in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal minds, bring about social change in Canadian cultural memory.

In the third chapter, I deal with Aboriginal cultural re-appropriation through new media technologies. With a focus on digital projects by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, the Mohawk new media artist, I examine the role of Aboriginal new media art in conjunction with socio-cultural activism as well as Aboriginal recognition and resurgence. Aboriginal new media art offers a critical lens "allowing for Native people not only to control the image presented of the self but also to create a nexus of new knowledges" (Goeman, "Introduction to Indigenous Performances" 8). Mishuana Goeman states:

With new technologies, indigenous people are able to express their worldviews and create visions for their communities and the world at large... [they] use the power of the media and indigenous performance to expose settler colonial power structures that have benefited from and exploited the vanishing Indian motif in order to deny Native land rights. ("Introduction to Indigenous Performances" 7)

Although new media has imposed various forms of misrepresentations and stereotypical images upon Aboriginal peoples and cultures, I argue that Skawennati's counter-narrative artworks turn cyberspace into a valuable tool for Aboriginal communities to retake control over their present and future identities and cultures. I call attention to the dual face of new media technologies and

explore its simultaneous roles of creating and subverting stereotypical images.<sup>14</sup> I assert that through an artistic and Aboriginal perspective Skawennati embraces the potential of the colonial legacy to subvert the historical figures of “Indian,” indigenizes virtual territories, and envisions Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty in the future. To this end, I reflect on two of Skawennati’s digital projects: *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> and *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century*. With the aim of “reclaim[ing] Indigenous history and posit[ing] a future where Indigenous nations have self-determination,” Skawennati’s new media projects explore both Aboriginal history and the future of Aboriginal self-identity (Leggatt 217). Skawennati’s work highlights the importance of storytelling in Aboriginal cultural evolution. She re-tells important events of Aboriginal history that were passed orally from generation to generation (including the story of Kateri Tekakwitha’s sainthood in 1680, the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, and the Oka crisis in 1990) and adapts them using modern technologies. Through a positive Aboriginal perspective, all these traumatic historical events are represented as the basis of the present resistance that paves the way for ongoing Aboriginal activism. Ironically, Skawennati’s work represents the ineffectuality of colonial strategies of assimilation and appropriation, and depicts “incredible advancements” (*Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> Episode 9) for Aboriginal nations so that Aboriginal peoples dominate the future of Turtle Island both physically and culturally. She underlines the presence of Aboriginal peoples and their cultural domination in the future in order to contribute to the reinforcement of Aboriginal collective power. To put it another way, Skawennati’s digital artworks act as a platform of socio-cultural activism that responds to colonial efforts of removing Indigenous identity from any future imaginary by depicting a vital, dynamic, and sovereign future for Aboriginal nations in the virtual world. I further discuss how Skawennati’s counter-narrative

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<sup>14</sup> This is what Loft calls the “transformative” and “transformational” roles of technology (see “Decolonizing the ‘Web’”).

projects, rather than a simple representation of Aboriginal rebellion, act as a “decolonial episteme” (Driskill 165) leading Aboriginal peoples to imagine and believe themselves to be important, strong, and sovereign nations upon Turtle Island. I argue that the iteration of old histories and envisaging new stories are the core of Skawennati’s projects that participate in the process of recognition and decolonization by re-constructing indigeneity from an Aboriginal perspective and preserving Indigenous identity for future generations.

My thesis conceptualizes the idea that the right to self-representation is evolving through the works of Aboriginal artists in new, creative and performative ways in order to pave the way towards sovereignty and decolonization. By examining Abel’s, Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s innovative artworks represented in different visual mediums of erasure poetry, performance art, and new media art, I argue that Aboriginal arts are powerful and complementary practices used to heal Aboriginal peoples’ wounds and pains, create new hi/stories in the collective memory of Canadians, leading Aboriginal peoples towards acts of recognition, resurgence, self-determination, and decolonization.

Today, Aboriginal decolonization movements reveal the fact that colonization is an ongoing process in North American society. Aboriginal peoples still suffer “the ongoing erosion of Indigenous language, knowledge, and culture as a result of colonization” (Battiste *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* xx) while “Canada prides itself on being free and democratic” (Laboucan-Massimo 213). With the aim of providing a comparative and comprehensive study of Aboriginal contemporary art within Canada, my thesis deals with the burgeoning field of contemporary Aboriginal literature and art in order to explore their decolonizing potential. Through a decolonial lens, my project seeks to investigate how Aboriginal contemporary art disrupts the ongoing settler colonial trajectory of the “vanishing Indian” to envision Aboriginal sovereignty “by foregrounding [Aboriginal] histories and centering Indigeneity” (Rice 43).

Despite Aboriginal peoples' continual reclamations of traditional history and culture, Aboriginal communities are still "cultural minorities rather than sovereign nations with long political histories" (Siebert 2). The reason for this situation is that Aboriginal history and culture have mostly been represented through the political lens of settler colonizers. I intend to demonstrate that the selected artists' works bring alternative frameworks that subvert colonial representations and reinforce Aboriginal collective power, a stance that can lead Aboriginals towards self-determination in the future. These works reject the politics of recognition, and their performative storytelling creates new politics of self-recognition and decolonization in terms of revalorizing Aboriginal languages, identities, and cultures in order to arrive at self-affirmation and sovereignty. Abel's, Belmore's, and Skawenati's art-based resistance change "political recognition" into "cultural recognition" (Siebert 5) and become "the subjects of representational resurrection" (11).

## Chapter One:

### Inventive Intervention: Aboriginal Cultural Re-appropriation of Western-Colonial Texts

“To be Native and to read White literature is to be placed in a war zone of images and feelings. To be Native and to read White literature is to walk a long journey of alienation. In response to the war of words against us, we Native writers and scholars have drawn on our various languages, legends, narratives, or footnotes to dismantle stereotypes, upset conventions, and invent new genres.”

Emma LaRoque, *When the Other is Me* 161

“We, as poets, respond to our history, social dynamics, culture (in whatever form it is saved and lost and lived). We are the result of our environment resisting development and the battles our surroundings have lost to progress. And we, as poets, are here to witness, ruminate, and creatively express our stories in verse to all that has gone, all that is now, and visions for the future... We must tell our own stories to offer an honest definition of who we are.”

Janet Rogers, “Blood Moves with Us—Story Poetry Lives Inside” 253

Quoting from Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Emma LaRocque, in the introduction to her book *When the Other Is Me*, argues that through “Western techniques of representation,” Aboriginal peoples, their lives and experiences are represented as “diametrically opposite” to the reality of Aboriginal cultures and worldviews (4). What is considered as “Indian” in contemporary colonial media “is perhaps one of the most distorted and dehumanized figures in White North American history, literature, and popular culture” (4). By the same token, Daniel

Francis, in *The Imaginary Indian*, asserts that “Indians” are different from Aboriginal peoples. Indian is the image of Aboriginal peoples constructed by White settlers and Westerners. European settlers consider themselves as “Canadians” and call Indians “Other”: “Indians were always thought of as the Other ... There was no place for the ‘savage’ in the world the newcomers were building. Canadian history ... was the struggle of civilization against savagery” (Francis 223). The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was the apogee of colonial efforts in assimilating “Indians” into the mainstream of North American society. In order to legitimize their illegal settlement, settlers imagined and traced Aboriginal peoples as a vanishing race “whether by dressing up in feathers and mocassins at summer camp, or by erecting another totem pole as a representative symbol of Canada, or by roaring an Indian chant from the bleachers at a baseball game” (Francis 223). With the aim of appropriating Aboriginal land and culture, settler governments established the residential school system and imposed Western religious beliefs on Aboriginal children. Colonial media represented Aboriginal peoples as “bloody,” “squaw,” and “Injun” and interpreted Aboriginal art and culture without considering Indigenous perspectives and rights. During the first half of the twentieth century, anthropological publications offered significant theoretical frameworks contributing to acknowledging and ensuring the aims of erasure and assimilation of colonial states. Under the pretext of preserving Aboriginal cultures, anthropological discourses pushed Aboriginal peoples to marginal positions by situating Aboriginal communities in the vanished past and transferring and confining their artworks to museums. Jordan Abel is a Nisga’a poet whose work employs the technique of erasure to counter the historic and ongoing colonial goal of removing Aboriginal peoples and cultures, and subvert the assumptions about the “Imaginary Indian” represented in Western-colonial texts in general, and more specifically, in anthropological contexts. Through a particular view of language and



literature, Abel engages with the materiality of the texts to interrogate nineteenth and twentieth century Western-colonial novels and anthropological texts.

In this chapter, I focus on Jordan Abel's erasure poetry, especially *The Place of Scraps* and *Injun*, to argue that the technique of erasure is a critical tool for interrupting Western-colonial texts and cultural re-appropriation and decolonization within Turtle Island. To this end, through a theoretical approach, the first part of this chapter will explore erasure poetry as a contemporary independent genre of conceptual writing by referring to scholars such as Marjorie Perloff, Caroline Bergvall, and Sonnet L'Abbé. Then, in the analytical part, I study the political use of erasure in Abel's *The Place of Scraps* and *Injun* by examining the question of avant-gardism in his visual-narrative productions.

### **The Absent Presence**

In the "contact zone"<sup>15</sup> of Settler and Aboriginal cultures, the Western culture that "enjoys advantages of wealth or power or technology" attempts to assimilate Aboriginal culture (Francis 221). Through such "cultural relativism" (Biolsi 136), European settlers built a society centered on European culture. That is, instead of constructing "a new picture of the world" (Pratt 34) based on recognition and acceptance of cultural distinctiveness, Western governments have moved towards cultural appropriation and assimilation. Colonial states have created an "Imaginary Indian" depending on their misrepresentations and imaginations and believed their assumptions as real.

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<sup>15</sup> The idea of "Contact Zone" is originally introduced by Mary Louise Pratt in her 1991 article "Art of the Contact Zone." According to Pratt's definition, "contact zone" implies "spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (Pratt 36).

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that “historical processes of imperialism” are rooted in Western academic disciplines, especially philosophy and anthropology, as they constitute the foundation of understanding Aboriginal history, knowledge, and culture (68). In the introduction to her book, Tuhiwai Smith argues that the word “research,” employed by ongoing imperialist and colonialist academic institutions, is “one of the dirtiest words in Indigenous vocabulary” and leads Aboriginal communities towards silence and absence (1). Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes the concept of “academic freedom” by indigenizing Western-colonial methods and ways of understanding (68). Indigenizing, according to Tuhiwai Smith, implies reclaiming, retelling, and rewriting Aboriginal hi/stories in Aboriginal language and perspective; “transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages” (7). A review of Aboriginal writing shows that from the 1970s onwards “a steady stream of socio-political commentaries, then poetry, and autobiographies” have challenged colonial practices (LaRoque 25). Aboriginal writings, as “counter-stories” (Tuhiwai Smith 2), have resisted the Western version of history and subverted stereotypical images; they bear witness to Aboriginal survival and the presence of their cultures. Tuhiwai Smith underlines the importance of sharing lived experiences by Aboriginal peoples: “Sharing is a good thing to do, it is a very human quality ... To create something new through that process of sharing is to create the old, to reconnect relationship and to recreate our humanness” (110). Writing and re-writing their hi/stories helps Aboriginal peoples to find their place within Turtle Island and accelerates the healing process. By writing, Aboriginal writers, as Kim Anderson states in *A Recognition of Being*, “can deal with anger, pain, and sadness, and then begin to kindle positive feelings about their identity” (119). Anishinaabe writer and scholar

Gerald Vizenor expands this idea to emphasize the centrality of survivors and their stories, by stating that:

Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent...

Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate and, in the course of international declarations of human rights, is a narrative estate of native survivance. ("Aesthetics of Survivance" 1)

I argue that "survivance stories," as re-represented through Aboriginal poetry, contribute to the process of healing of colonial traumas and catalyzes Aboriginal movements towards resurgence by, as Cree poet Neal McLeod in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* argues, "bringing the narrative power of our old stories into the present" (3). Sharing Aboriginal stories acts as "magic weapons" of resistance (McKegney, *Magic Weapons*, 8), ensures Aboriginal presence, and re-constructs self-determination in the future society of North America. Neal McLeod, in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, argues that as "a theoretical activity grounded in narratives and language... Indigenous poetics is the embodiment of Indigenous consciousness" (McLeod 3-4). In the same regard, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (Anishinaabe), in "The Power of Dirty Water," states:

Indigenous poetics is not a new expression; it is an ongoing and lived praxis of which we can all be a part. We only have to interact with our narrative traditions, try to understand our inheritances, and express our experiences with a living universe as resilient, capable, and dynamic Indigenous peoples and we can encapsulate some of its power. (212)

Many other Aboriginal writers and poets such as Lee Maracle, Rita Joe, Jeannette Armstrong, and Rosanna Deerchild highlight the functional role of poetry in resisting ongoing colonialism, recording history, and teaching Aboriginal world views. Lee Maracle, in "Indigenous Poetry and

the Oral,” declares: “Our poems and stories will show us how to create oneness between ourselves and the world” (310). Rita Joe argues that poetry gives her the power to represent her culture “outside of racist paradigms”: “I call my words a chisel, carving an image [that] has been knocked down for too long by the old histories and old chronicles” (qtd. in Anderson 119). Jeannette Armstrong argues that poetry is a privileged genre for Aboriginal writers that provides the opportunity to “get through to an audience, and voice what mattered to [Aboriginal peoples] as subjects” (*Native Poetry in Canada* xvi). In “Land Speaking” Armstrong looks at the mutual connection between land and language in Indigenous poetics. She argues that language, land, and people cannot be separated in Aboriginal culture. Indigenous poetics is a space where “Indigenous language is born from the land, and thus carries sacred and sustaining powers” (145). Accordingly, poetry written by Aboriginal writers “is inherently political because it is the attempt to hold on to an alternative center of consciousness, holding its own position, despite the crushing weight of English and French” (McLeod 12).

With these Aboriginal scholars’ theories in mind, I argue that Abel’s creative and critical work is a performative decolonial act that represents Aboriginal collective traumas while resisting colonial strategies of assimilation and cultural appropriation by maintaining its relationships to Aboriginal epistemology. Abel’s visual poems respond to and subvert Western colonial texts and represent Aboriginal cultures through an Aboriginal perspective free from colonial policies of recognition based on European assumptions and misrepresentations. Abel challenges the boundaries between literature and art and uses the power of poetic language to reclaim an Aboriginal “cultural voice” (Allen 294-5). In my opinion, there is a kind of “literary umbilical cord” (Rogers 254) in Abel’s poetic language that connects Aboriginal oral culture, colonial texts, and visual arts. Inspired by the Nisga’a tradition of pole carving, Abel’s visual poetry is a “multimedial” work that combines image, text, art, and computer technologies.

Contemporary Aboriginal art integrates different disciplines in order to offer insight into the colonial practices of misrepresentation and as an effective way of resisting its ongoing implications. Aboriginal art “through the lens of global Indigeneity” specifies a coherent set of cultural and political aspirations that deal with pan-Indigenous concerns about colonial resistance, the reclamation of Aboriginal sovereignty, and self-determination (McMaster, “Under Indigenous Eyes” 64). Ryan Rice, in “Presence and Absence REDUX,” deals with colonial strategies of Aboriginal erasure and exclusion in the history of North America. He argues that Aboriginal art is “a more perfect form of communication” (43) contributing to learning and familiarizing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples with Aboriginal knowledge and culture. Abel’s creative practice of “word carving” turns the supposedly dead (Aboriginal) culture into a living tradition. His visual productions create multiple images that provide spaces where readers arrive at their own interpretations which, as McLeod states, is “the essence of Indigenous poetic theory” (*Indigenous Poetics in Canada* 9). Abel’s poems can be considered as both contemporary art and the restoration of Nisga’a tradition. Abel refers to his ancestral cultural practice to counter the deep-seated colonial cultural pathologies of misrepresentation and erasure.

The term “erasure” implies a presence that is left only by traces; something that is no longer accessible, available, or directly visible. Abel uses this technique to ironically highlight the presence of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures deliberately misinterpreted or made absent in colonial texts. Abel’s practices of compilation and erasure draw the readers’ attention to the imposed silence and absence as well as the deliberate ignorance and cultural appropriation of Aboriginal culture. Erasure poetry is a subcategory of experimental literature that, particularly in the post-war decades, was considered a critical method in disrupting pre-existing texts. Poets challenged the message of other poets as pre-determined truth and attempted to (re-)produce new meanings from previous works by relying on philosophical concepts. Erasure poetry leads its

readers towards “the terrain of the visual, of the non-linguistic” (L’Abbé 217). Readers/viewers are challenged to find the message of the poet by seeking to understand which part of a text is deliberately deleted and which part is maintained. Using the technique of erasure, Abel re-writes and manipulates Western-colonial texts to create “a radically new graphic consciousness” (Beaulieu and Betts 257) of Aboriginal presence and culture. His works are artistic practices that articulate Aboriginal cultural re-appropriation. Abel intervenes in Western colonial texts and attracts public attention to debates about land, territory, belonging, and the deliberate denial of Aboriginal presence and voice. Abel’s ironic and purposeful technique of erasure is a powerful medium for Aboriginal cultural revitalization and self-determination as it comes directly out of lived experience with Nisga’a culture.

Abel’s work reflects a form of visual and performance writing where Aboriginal resurgence represents itself through the connections of images and words. His poems, in my opinion, are part of the burgeoning field of contemporary conceptual writing that employs the generative strategy of combining language, image, literary appropriation, erasure, and digital technology. I use Caroline Bergvall’s and Marjorie Perloff’s theories about performance writing to substantiate my argument about Abel’s performance-conceptual poems. Perloff, in “The Conceptualist Turn,” argues that contemporary poetry moves toward bringing visuality into the verbal aspects of writing (35-6). In “Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent,” Perloff also argues that “the verse must be ‘natural’ and ‘free,’ the syntax that of the declarative sentence, the language accessible, and the imagery concrete” (124). She emphasizes “the materiality of language itself and a postmodernist understanding” of concrete poetry and argues that contemporary poems must be seen, heard, and performed (133). In the same vein, Caroline Bergvall, visual poet and audio-visual artist, highlights the integration of visual and verbal forms in performance writing for better understanding and transferring meanings, and argues:

“Performance writing is about tension and pooling. Atomization of verbal and visual language forms and localization of intent. Concerted, precise use of these materials and how they inform each other, language among them” (92). According to Bergvall, in addition to words and texts, the visual details, punctuation, and blank spaces, although partial, have meanings or can make semantic differences: “[E]verything about a piece of work is active and carries meaning. Any treatment, any font, any blank, any punctuation, any intonation, any choice of materials, any blob, however seemingly peripheral to the work, is part of the work, carries it, opens it up, closes it in, determines it. This is its performance. Its points of impact” (91). Perloff’s and Bergvall’s arguments can be mapped onto Abel’s visual poetry. Paying attention to the visual structure along with verbal aspects in Abel’s works turns his poetry into a scene of performance that invites readers to watch his poems as much as they are reading them. Abel himself states:

As a writer, I would say that I’m very interested in the materiality and aesthetics of language, but also the content. In many ways, I’m interested in focusing on the surfaces of language and text as way to address depth otherwise unaddressable. Perhaps a line can be drawn there, too. (Betts and Bök, “An Interview with Jordan Abel” 296)

Abel’s performance-conceptual poems represent texts “without words” where meanings are carried through images (Dworkin 43). In Abel’s poems, the erasure of words from the original texts while maintaining commas, periods, and parentheses as well as decomposing phrases and words in letters represents and speaks back to the colonial erasure of Aboriginal presence, languages, and cultures.

Abel’s performative poems create what Sam McKegney has called a “generative alliance” between the creator and audiences. McKegney, in “Writer-Reader Reciprocity and the Pursuit of Alliance through Indigenous Poetry,” focuses on the reciprocal responsibilities between writers and readers and emphasizes the engagement of listeners that undertakes the dynamism of

Aboriginal poetry (44). McKegney argues that a “participatory and reciprocal creative relationship between poet and audience” (44) makes readers “active participants rather than passive recipients” (52). The role of the audience becomes vital in producing and reproducing the meaning of conceptual texts. Abel’s works, by breaking the conventional structures and linear form of language, provides the space for readers to arrive at their own understanding beyond the intentions of the poet. Abel’s texts transform into performative and active concepts through the responsive interpretations of audiences. The main characteristic of visual performance is its vivacity. Abel depicts the vitality and dynamism of his performance poetry through conceptual writing, that is, through “poeticizing” the passive colonial narratives into reciprocal texts. With this in mind, Abel’s performative-conceptual writing represents both the absence (according to the theory of “the death of the author”<sup>16</sup>) and the presence of the poet (in terms of de-valorization of the colonial trajectory of vanishing “Indianness”). I argue that Abel’s dynamic poems connote the presence and dynamism of Aboriginal nations. Through the practice of “revision,” both historical and material, Abel’s creative re-interpretation of Western colonial texts can be considered as the transformation of the “ordinary” into “an original and a new beginning” (Andersson 8). Abel’s creative iteration of colonial texts challenges the public mind about “what is represented and what is silenced” (L’Abbé 220) in reality. This dilemma can be seen clearly by considering Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction.

According to Derrida, there is no end to interpretations of a particular text: “Each ‘story’ (and each occurrence of the word ‘story’, each ‘story’ in the story) is part of the other, makes the other a part (of itself), each ‘story’ is at once larger and smaller than itself, includes itself without

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<sup>16</sup> “The death of the author” employed by Roland Barthes in 1967. Barth questioned the real author of texts by proposing the multifaceted manifestation of a particular text in different languages, cultures, and beliefs. He argued that there is not any definitive explanation of a particular text and each audience has a unique interpretation of the text based on his/her experience and worldview; so that, any reader of a text can be its author. See “The Death of the Author” (1967) by Roland Barthes.



including (or comprehending) itself, identifies itself with itself even as it remains utterly different from its homonym” (“Living On” 99-100). Thus, “[t]he re-working of a textual problematic has affected this aspect of the text as narrative ... by placing it in the foreground” (85). To put it another way, different forms of a particular text can emerge in different contexts over time and through different perspectives. Re-writing a particular text represents a new aspect of the text, as each reader makes his/her own interpretation from the text. Every reader discovers a new aspect of the text that was not visible by others. “Reality” is “changeable and transformative” (Armstrong, “Land speaking” 157); it depends on “how we perceive the world and how we imagine our own subjectivity” (Roberson 134). The number of interpretations of a text is thus the same as the number of its readers, and none of them are outside of the text. Derrida’s arguments contributed to breaking the bubble of structuralism and highlighting the ideas of poststructuralism by privileging the concept of temporal continuity. Erasure poetry, in this sense, is tied up with Derrida’s argument about emphasizing the power of already written and already read works. He popularized erasure as a method of thought in postmodern writings, where rather than a sole truth, different meanings may emerge from a single text according to interpretations by different readers. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deals with writing “under erasure” as one of the evocative tactics in poststructuralist writing. He argues that “all origins are similarly unoriginal” (xxxix); they are just a “trace” and “provisional” and can thus be re-traced through different languages:

The concept of the arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure. It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. From then on, to wrench the concept of the trace from the classical scheme, which would derive it from a response or from an originary non-trace and which

would make of it an empirical mark, one must indeed speak of an originary trace or arche-trace. (xxxvi)

Here, Derrida argues that the supplemental, different, and even opposite aspects of a single discourse appear through iteration of some parts and exclusion of others.

Along with the development of Derrida's theories about the performative role of language, the critical debate of appropriation emerged in the late 1970s and became a key concept in postmodernism discourses in the 1980s (Verwoert 355). Contemporary artists and writers have valorized the art of copying and literary appropriation as a critical strategy to recombine and re-contextualize historical texts and cultures and reposition them in creative frameworks in order to create new contexts and meanings. In this regard, the context of Abel's practice of erasure can be also read through a "deconstructive" reading. Steve McCaffery, in "Crossive Poetics," deals with "poetics of techniques and recombinant materials" (124). He argues that the poststructuralists' theories contribute to reinforcing the potential and ability of language by entering new and open directions. McCaffery considers conventional grammar and syntax as a system of limitation. The counter-language method of erasure can transform the restrained and linear parts of the language into open and free concepts. Abel uses the material power of language "to shift the perspective from colonizer to colonized, claiming power over ways of seeing and representing" (McMaster, "Under Indigenous Eyes" 66). Abel's erasure method contributes to both restoring the traditional Nisga'a craft of carving and resisting colonial strategies of assimilation and appropriation.

Abel's creative practice of erasure "opens up crucial space for difference in the structure of history, even when drawing from the same material base" (Fong and Dodd 4). From within Abel's works, there is still a 'word war' going on. The practice of erasure as a "discursive space in which relations of power play out" (L'Abbé 213), ironically highlights suppressed Aboriginal

voices. Abel's analogy of the Nisga'a culture of pole-carving draws readers/viewers into "the absent presence or hidden referent" (L'Abbé 218). Abel argues: "To me, the erasures of Barbeau's words are moments where Indigenous presences are articulated" (Betts and Bök, "An Interview with Jordan Abel" 292). The blanks and empty spaces in Abel's texts give voice to the "peoples whose histories and languages have been erased by colonial practices" (L'Abbé 198).

### **A Narrative Conquest**

Teun Van Dijk, in *Elite Discourse and Racism*, argues that elites, scholars, and academic institutions and their works play crucial roles in cultural, social, and political movements of the society as they are leaders in "politics, the media, scholarship, education, corporate business, and many other social domains" (17). Dijk focuses on "the system of racism and its discursive reproduction" created and re-created through "the ways whites speak and write about Others" (6). He also challenges the field of anthropology as "a study of the reproduction of racism" stating that "modern anthropology... is not interested in 'exotic' people, here or there, but focuses on Our own ways of thinking and writing about Them" (16). Thomas Biolsi and Larry Zimmerman in *Indians and Anthropologists*, highlight the work of Native American author and activist Vine Deloria Jr., who has critiqued the field of anthropology and ethnography in North American society as a "late imperial" (4) practice that allows colonialism to be "self-confirming, self-referential, and self-reproducing" (3). Biolsi and Zimmerman also highlight the connection between anthropological discourse and ongoing colonialism "against which and within which American Indian people must live" (4). Based on the colonial premise of "Anglo-racial superiority," anthropologists' representations of Aboriginal cultures are just the repetition of misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Indigeneity that colonial states have created over

centuries (Roe 57). The discipline of anthropology has, ultimately, contributed to placing Aboriginal nations in marginal positions.

In *The Place of Scraps*, Abel challenges the representation of Aboriginal peoples and cultures in the fields of anthropology and ethnography reflected in *Totem Poles* (1964) by the Canadian, Euro-educated, anthropologist Marius Barbeau (1883-1969). In Western-colonial perspectives “Barbeau is notable for his pioneering work establishing anthropology and legitimizing the place of aboriginal peoples in Canada” (Nurse, “Their Ancient Customs are Gone” 22). His anthropological work played a vital role in constructing Canadian cultural memory. After finishing his study in law at Laval University, interested in the nature of humanity, he moved to Europe and studied anthropology at Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, and took summer courses at the Sorbonne. His work ultimately focused on “totemism” in the north-west tribes of North America, although Barbeau, himself, had never visited these communities. After finishing his study, he came back to Canada to work on the cultures of Aboriginal nations of the northwest. During the 1930s and 1940s, Barbeau published books and journal articles about Aboriginal peoples and their cultures which are valuable for preserving “the remnants of rapidly vanishing cultures to reconstruct authentic ‘prehistoric’ native cultures” (Nurse, “But Now Things Have Changed” 444). Andrew Nurse argues that Barbeau’s anthropological practices drew public attention toward Aboriginal culture. Barbeau’s copious number of publications about Aboriginal people and culture also provided an opportunity for Aboriginal nations to be seen by Canadians as Aboriginal tribes had been assimilated into white society and had almost “disappeared” (“Their Ancient Customs Are Gone” 18-21).

Despite Western claims about the significant role of Barbeau’s works in preserving Aboriginal knowledge, culture, and art, Abel’s interpretation of *Totem Poles* demonstrates that Barbeau’s text is actually a colonial act of assimilation, appropriation, and homogenization. It

portrayed Aboriginal culture and peoples as a “vanished race.” *The Place of Scraps* reveals the contradictory aspect of Marius Barbeau’s anthropological practices. Abel destabilizes colonial imaginations about “Indianness” by using Barbeau’s own words as the source of his works. Abel uses Western-colonial texts as a “totem pole” to re-situate settler-colonizers’ intentions in new contexts by preserving Barbeau’s words and letters. In his poetry, Abel uses a creative visual framework to re-write Barbeau’s words in a completely different context. Barbeau’s words, under Abel’s interpretation, contribute to decolonizing, indigenizing, or Nisga’a-izing colonial texts. Through an Aboriginal decolonial lens, Abel interrogates Barbeau’s anthropological process as a colonial practice where Aboriginal peoples are represented “as powerless, as victims with little or no ability to shape their day-to-day lives or chart their own futures” (Iverson and Davies 2).

*The Place of Scraps* begins by separating Barbeau’s and Abel’s interpretation from the hi/story of constructing the Nisga’a totem pole, “A feud over this pole” (5). Abel and Barbeau use the same words to recount the same hi/story, yet in two completely different versions. From Barbeau’s colonial perspective, the pole is the result of “rivalry” and “feud” between two West Coast North American Aboriginal clans (fig.1), while Abel’s Aboriginal perspective implicates the friendship, alliance, and cooperation between these two clans “to put up the tallest pole ever seen in the country” (fig. 2).

"A feud over this pole. Old chief Mountain or Sakau'wan, some time before his death in 1928, gave an account of the rivalry between the Eagle-Raven clan and the Killer-Whales or Gispewudwades of Nass River, over the size of their new totems.<sup>1</sup> In summary here it is.

The Killer-Whale chief, Sispagut, who headed the faction of the earlier occupants on the river, announced his determination to put up the tallest pole ever seen in the country. Its name was to be Fin-of-the-Killer-Whale. However, instead of selecting for its carver Hladerh whose right it was to do the work, he chose Oyai of the canyon. Hladerh naturally felt slighted and confided his grudge to Sakau'wan, chief of the Eagles, and his friend. From then on the Eagles and the Wolves of their own day were to be closely allied, as the ancestors of both had moved in from Alaska and at one time had been allies.

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account see *Alaska Beckons* by Marius Barbeau. The Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho and the Macmillan Company of Canada, 1947, pp. 127-136"

Marius Barbeau, *Totem Poles*, vol. 1 (1950), 29.

Fig. 1. Jordan Abel. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013. P. 5.

or Sakau'wan  
and  
Sispagut  
the river  
the country  
the canyon  
allied  
by Marius Barbeau

Fig. 2. Jordan Abel. *The Place of Scraps*, Talonbooks, 2013. P. 7.

Abel re-writes “by Marius Barbeau” at the bottom of his poem to emphasize the provenance of his work (7). Moreover, through the difference between the fonts of the writing “by Marius Barbeau” and the rest of the poem (“by Marius Barbeau” is written in a smaller font), Abel gives importance to Aboriginal perspectives and underlines that what is being heard through Barbeau’s words is the silenced voices of the Nisga’a. Abel also repeats the word “his” (which in Barbeau’s voice means the Nisga’a nation) fourteen times in spread letters extracted from Barbeau’s words (fig. 3).

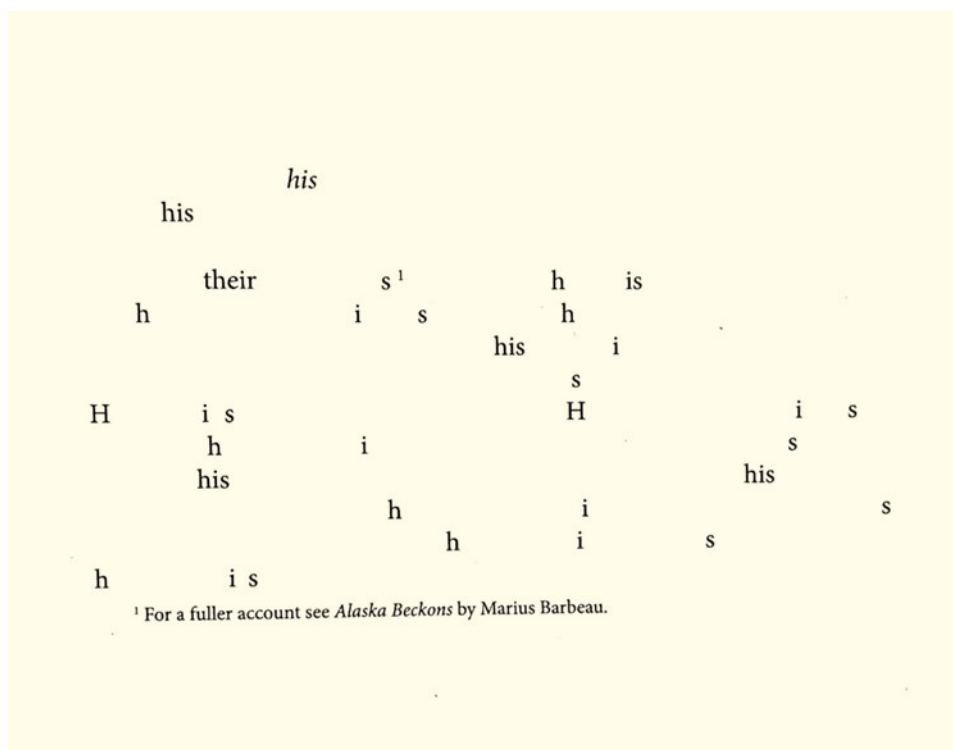


Fig. 3. Jordan Abel. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013. P. 13.

Through this iteration, Abel underlines the concept of belonging. He ironically highlights the subject of Barbeau’s text and emphasizes that although the aim of *Totem Poles* is Nisga’a culture and nation, they are held in the margins. This idea is reinforced in the next poem where Abel states “In summary, / his” (fig. 4).

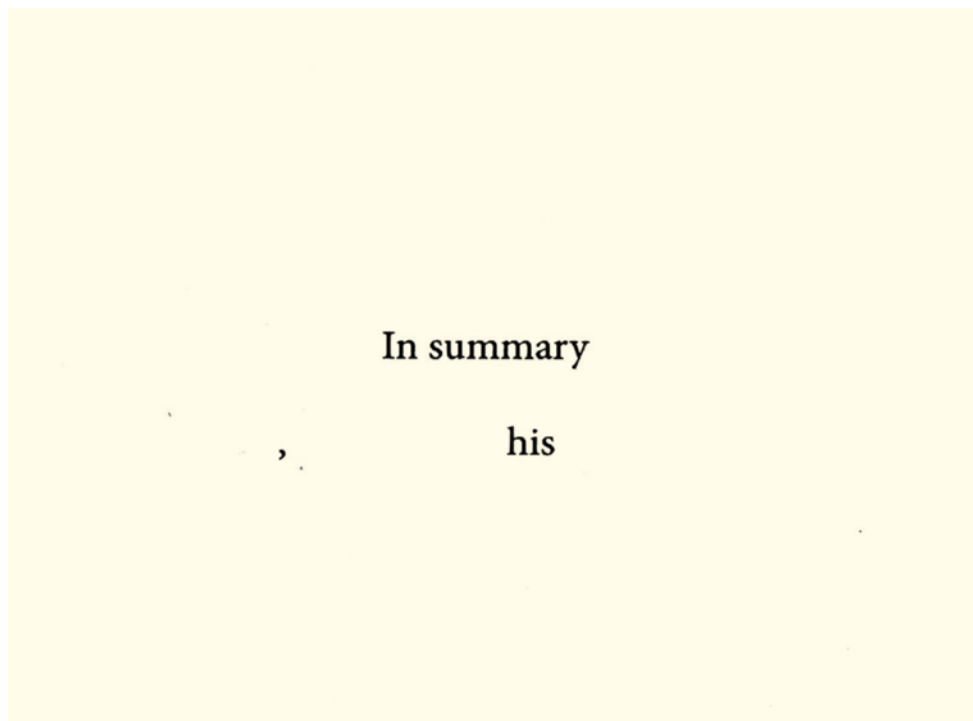


Fig. 4. Jordan Abel. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013. P. 15.

The suppression of Aboriginal voice and subjectivity, as well as the theft of their belongings by colonial states, are represented in several poems and in different ways that reveal the ability of Abel's language and erasure technique. On page 47 of *The Place of Scraps*, Abel selects a paragraph from *Totem Poles* where Barbeau describes the figures on the Nisga'a totem pole. In Barbeau's paragraph, he uses Aboriginal words in parentheses. In Abel's first response to his passage, he re-writes the words in Nisga'a language still in parentheses in order to highlight that although the pole belongs to the Nisga'a and no one can describe it better than Nisga'a people, their perspective is ignored by Barbeau (49). Employing empty parentheses in the next poem (51) underlines Abel's critique against Aboriginal rejection, erasure, and objectification. Abel accentuates the impossibility of speaking or writing about a culture without considering the perspectives of its peoples as they are the owners and the source of that culture. Luther Standing Bear, Native American author and historian, emphasizes the importance of interpreting Aboriginal art and culture through an Aboriginal perspective by stating that "[t]he white man



does not understand the Indian for the reason he does not understand America. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil. The white man is still troubled with primitive fears; he still has in his consciousness the perils of this frontier continent” (qtd. in Francis 224). Aboriginal resurgence requires reclamation through Aboriginal voices, and resurgence, from an Aboriginal perspective, is the recognition of traditional Aboriginal knowledge, language, and worldview through an Aboriginal perspective without any colonial intervention. Glen Sean Coulthard, referring to Leanne Simpson, argues that Aboriginal resurgence is the movement of “regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; creating and using our artistic and performance based traditions” (*Red Skin, White Masks* 155).

The transportation of the Sakau’wan totem pole from the Nass River valley to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto reveals the colonial aims in erasing Aboriginal nations and cultures. “[S]urprised and ashamed that the pole that was removed from his ancestral village has also been excavated from his own memories” (Abel, *The Place of Scraps* 63), the wooden spoon carved by his father in hand (as a means of connection to his ancestry), Abel returns to Toronto to accomplish his responsibility in the repatriation of his ancestral heritage: “The pole is here; the poet is here” (143).

Barbeau considers “the great pole” as a “gift” and “wondrous treasure” and writes: “Anyone with a sound mind and a respectable education would understand that this monument must be preserved, and that I am bound by duty to be the one to preserve it” (*The Place of Scraps* 43). According to Barbeau, Nisga’a poles, and Aboriginal culture more generally, can be considered as “a source of inspiration” (Nurse, “Their Ancient Customs are Gone” 20) and thus should be preserved at museums. Throughout his work, Barbeau presents Aboriginal peoples as a “vanishing race” and defines them in relation to the past, much like cultural artworks “must be

preserved” (*The Place of Scraps* 43). Aboriginal peoples are alive, however, and they can preserve and interpret their culture in their own ways and from their own perspectives. Barbeau argues that although Aboriginal peoples are good informants, the information they offer is not always reliable and valuable due to their cultural interaction with European culture and forced assimilation into settler society. Aboriginal peoples, according to Barbeau, have lost a great part of their traditional knowledge and culture. He states: “The present-day Indians ... have dwindled in numbers; their ancient customs are gone, their character is lost. They are a vanishing race” (qtd. in Nurse, “Their Ancient Customs are Gone” 15). Nurse argues that, rather than discounting the value of Aboriginal cultures, Barbeau’s practice of transferring the Nisga’a pole to Toronto re-organized and re-contextualized Nisga’a culture. He states:

The great power of Barbeau’s anthropology lay in its ability to both represent and transform. Barbeau’s work drew aboriginal cultures into the cultural processes of modernity in ways that re-coded their meanings and redefined their relationship to Canadian culture ... In effect, his anthropological work illustrates the processes by which aboriginal cultures were incorporated into modern Canadian culture. (“Their Ancient Customs are Gone” 22)

In other words, in Barbeau’s anthropological settler perspective, his practice “lent [Aboriginal] cultures a new importance as a source of artifacts, artistic inspirations, and consumer goods” (Nurse, “Their Ancient Customs are Gone” 22). “Authentic” Aboriginal cultures are dead and Barbeau’s goal is to save the rest of Aboriginal cultures from disappearing from Canadian cultural history.

Nevertheless, Barbeau’s anthropological efforts were to “bring hardship instead of strength to the [Nisga’a] people” (Nyce 263). In Abel’s interpretation, the act of transmission of the pole contributes to “remov[ing] thousands of Indians successfully without feeling a tremor”

(*The Place of Scraps* 25). Barbeau’s anthropological practice of transmission unfolds colonial violence against Aboriginal peoples through dispossession and cultural rupture “because it is their stories that have been erased, falsified, slandered, or stolen” (LaRoque 162). Cutting up the pole into three pieces in order to transfer it to Toronto is, in Abel’s interpretation, a colonial strategy of destroying the self-knowledge, culture, and ultimately the identity of Aboriginal nations. Abel’s poetic responses challenge Barbeau’s ideological practice of cultural preservation and show how colonial states, instead of protecting Aboriginal peoples, have ensured Aboriginal cultural erasure (fig. 5).

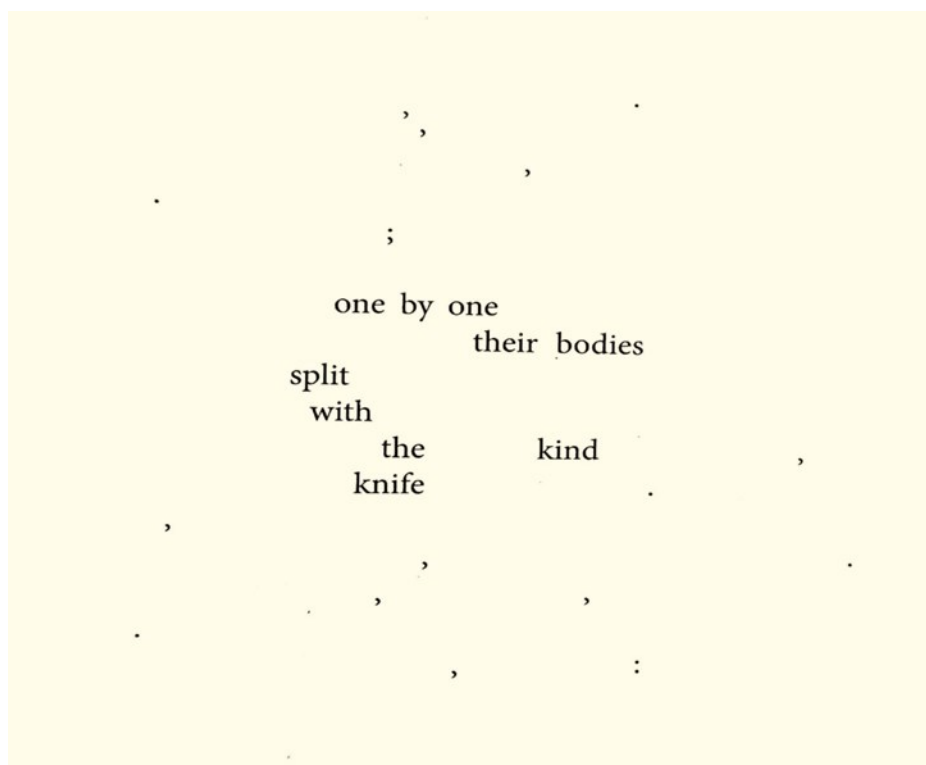


Fig. 5. Jordan Abel. *The Place of Scraps*. Talonbooks, 2013. P. 73.

Abel addresses colonial states that claim to preserve the cultural monument when it has “fallen” down, you “walk on it,” and “damaged its carving” (*The Place of Scraps* 19) and you “feel / no difference” to maintain it “in the water / or / Toronto” (21). Abel’s interpretation challenges

Barbeau's anthropological attempts to justify preservation and reveals the colonial intentions of cultural appropriation hidden behind their act of the pole transmission.

Thomas King, in *The Truth About Stories*, highlights the role of storytelling in Aboriginal history and cosmology. King argues that Aboriginal stories were derived from the Aboriginal worldview and create Aboriginal history. These stories thus have the power to "control our lives" because they can transform history (9). Oral narratives are preserved in Aboriginal peoples' memories and transferred from generation to generation. As a method of knowledge transmission, these stories teach important moral and cultural concepts. With this in mind, I argue that what was transmitted to Toronto through Barbeau's anthropological practice was just a "scrap" of carved wood and Barbeau was unable to transfer the traditional and oral stories of the Nisga'a nation. Allison Nyce, in "Transforming Knowledge," condemns Barbeau's act of removing the pole from the Nisga'a land and accentuates that the totem pole finds its meaning within the traditional territory of the Nisga'a reserve among its peoples and their traditional hi/stories by stating that: "Everything that we needed to show our history was imbedded in our material culture, in the land, and in our collective oral history" (259). Nyce continues:

Barbeau's recording and translations have left the Nisga'a with a wealth of material, but many of the names, stories, and facts were not transcribed properly or were misinterpreted in the translation from Nisga'a to English. Barbeau was not able to interview all Nisga'a elders, nor was he able to visit each village; and so his work is lacking in several areas of expertise. (261)

Although Barbeau carried out some of the first anthropological work on Aboriginal culture in Canada, his works, nevertheless, contributed to the colonial assimilation and appropriation process. Barbeau attempted to rebuild Aboriginal identity in accordance with colonial culture and in his anthropological practice sought to preserve an idealized image of Aboriginal peoples and

cultures as a “vanished race.” He tried to represent Aboriginal nations as dying cultures, “as they existed before the White Man came” and no longer exist (Francis 41). Ultimately, he examined Aboriginal peoples and their cultures through his colonial vision.

Abel’s *The Place of Scraps* shows that the reason that Barbeau’s works are admired as representative works on Aboriginal culture is because Aboriginal peoples’ voices are often silenced within them. Abel’s erasure poetry reveals that there is a relationship between the Western discipline of anthropology and the concepts of racism and capitalism. The lack of written Aboriginal history has allowed colonizers to interpret and even distort Aboriginal history and culture as they wished. Literacy became a means for colonial states to justify their superiority, and Aboriginal culture has been seen as inferior in comparison with colonial culture.

Abel uses similar methods in *Injun*, where he artfully depicts the past, present, and future of Aboriginal nations on Turtle Island. Using the power of digital technology, through a cut-and-paste structure, Abel wrote *Injun* by copying ninety-two Western texts and novels published between 1840 and 1950 in a Word document. The result was a 10,000-page source text. With the help of the “find” option, Abel searched for lines where the word “Injun” existed and he then “pasted” these fragmented parts in a new Word document and created a poem that interrogates colonial racism, violence, appropriation, and erasure. *Injun* is the result of recombination and re-contextualization. Using the art of collage, Abel dismantles some phrases and keeps some words to expose the fact that colonial racism is often at the core of Western novels. Julie Mannell considers *Injun* “a documentary about the way violence forces a breakdown in language and how interpretation shatters when we speak to manifest meaningless hate” (Mannell 66). The Western texts and novels turn into a map of colonial violence through Abel’s decolonial lens. The words in *Injun* provide “battlegrounds” for unsettling, destabilizing, and disrupting colonial

(mis)representation of “Indianness.” Abel’s cut-up poems in *Injun* point to the cutting up and erasure of Aboriginal presence, voices, and perspectives.

The poems in *Injun* are divided into three main parts: “Injun,” “Notes,” and “Appendix.” The book’s first part, “Injun,” is formed of twenty-six poems named a) – z) and presents cut-up phrases and words written in several lines in a row. It recounts the stories of Aboriginal peoples who experienced racism, colonization, violence, displacement and rejection, and contributes to both revealing and removing colonial misrepresentations from Aboriginal peoples and cultures. By breaking phrases into words and words into syllables, Abel reminds readers the fragmentation that colonial power imposed on Aboriginal peoples’ languages, cultures, and lands. Abel’s disruption of the structure of English language implies the destructive role of the residential school system in eradicating Aboriginal languages and cultures. Aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their families and territories and, under the political aims of assimilation and appropriation, Western language, religion, and culture were imposed upon them. In the poem “m),” by taking apart the words “blue” and “sky” (“bl ue” and “s ky”), Abel criticizes colonial industrialization and its destructive impacts on nature and Aboriginal land (15). Moreover, the poem “r)” (20) is written upside-down and in order to be able to read it, readers must turn the book upside-down. This haptic reversal represents colonial misrepresentations and the traumatic effects of colonial cultural inversions. Abel questions colonial writers for representing Aboriginal traditions, cultures, values, and world views in distorted ways. These irregularities imply that through the ongoing colonialism of Turtle Island, Aboriginal peoples, as well as their oral stories and cultures, have been constantly represented through inaccurate and negative images, and their cultures have been disrupted and dispersed.

In “Notes,” which contains twenty-eight poems, Abel highlights racist colonial words, such as “squaw,” “silence,” “redskin,” and “bloody,” by repeating and writing these words in bold and placing them in vertical columns (fig. 6).

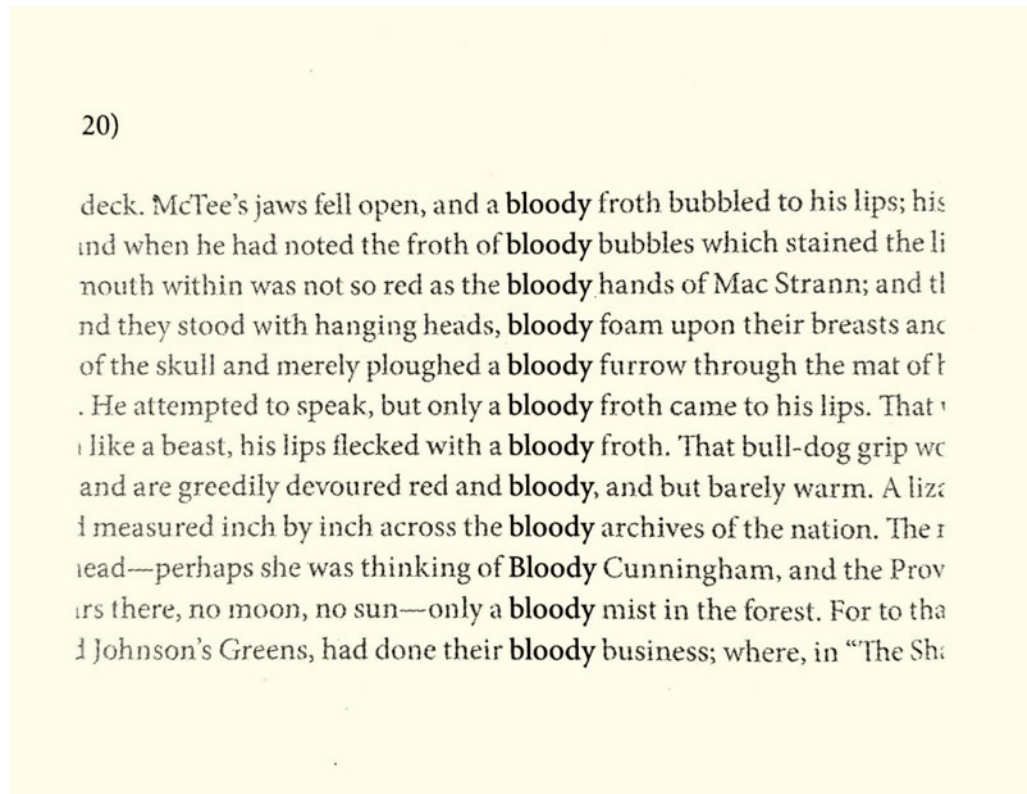


Fig. 6. Jordan Abel. “20).” *Injun*. Talonbooks, 2016. P. 50.

These highlighted words imply Aboriginal “lived experiences” and testify to all the traumas experienced by Aboriginal nations at different social, political, and cultural levels. The repetition of these racist words in successive lines also underlines the continuity of colonialism and demonstrates that “we are still confronting the violence of colonization. ... [T]here are still those that would enter our communities promising a quick fix to our socio-economic woes when the answer always has and continues to be sovereignty and self-determination over our lands and life” (Thomas-Muller 220). Abel’s “performative utterances” (Thalmair 349) ironically embody both the ongoing colonialism of Turtle Island and the persistence of Aboriginal resistance. This repetition of racist language represents the need for a “wake-up call” for Aboriginal peoples to

continue their resistance. Abel's textual/pictorial poems invite both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers to remember, witness, and attest to colonial violence. Borrowing Laboucan-Massimo's ideas about the Oka crisis, Abel's ironic and poetic use of colonial texts, in my opinion, equally offers "a symbol that we will no longer be silent ... we must stand strong as one ... we must choose to say no, no more. No more can you divide and conquer; no more will you instill fear in us. No more. We must choose to fight for the preservation of Mother Earth and a way of life that is sustainable for all" (216-7).

In "Appendix," Abel destabilizes Western novels and when he arrives at the word "injun" he leaves a gap as a refusal to use the term. In other words, the empty spaces in the third section of the book represent Abel's resistance to re-employing the colonial term of "injun." Abel's insistence on erasing the word "Injun," as a symbol of colonialism and racism, denotes his emphasis on removing colonial violence against and racist images about Aboriginal peoples. The use of blank space in most of Abel's poems provides the possibility of thinking about what has happened to Aboriginal nations and how Aboriginal presence was deliberately erased. As a dynamic reality, Abel's conceptual texts engage in the supposed absence in order to highlight the neglected or denied presence. Abel's self-selected silence interrogates the forced silence imposed on Aboriginal peoples by colonial states and reclaims Aboriginal presence. Abel de-valorizes colonial literary texts into "racist sounds" and challenges their superficial colonial slogan of reconciliation. Abel's *Injun* emphasizes that the reclamation and rewriting of a distorted colonial history is an important step towards the repatriation of Aboriginal land and culture and reconstruction of Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty.

Abel's appropriation-based poems might be criticized as plagiarism because of his re-use of colonial-historical texts. However, it should be noted that it is completely clear where Abel's poems are taken from and who their original owners are. Although Abel uses colonial words, the



value of his works is that they aesthetically and politically challenge the traditional concepts of innovation and originality. Abel's "poetics of resistance, revival, renewal, and transformation" (Allen 294) re-use colonial words to "write back" against colonial oppression, violence, and injustice and give agency to suppressed Aboriginal voices in order to reclaim their hi/stories. Rather than simple imitation or mimicry, Abel's poems act as "word warriors." As LaRoque argues "words and images are not just words and images. They can pack a powerful punch" (121). I argue that Abel's counter-repetition work moves away from plagiarism towards innovative criticism and creative re-understanding in order to reveal the hidden or deliberately denied Aboriginal account of history in order to create new contexts from decontextualized texts.

Betts, in "Seeing Visual Poetry in Canada as Decolonial Poesis," declares that Abel's use of other writer's texts highlights "the greater theft and appropriation of aboriginal land and culture artifacts by European settlers" (4). Colonialism is rooted in theft; settlers have occupied Aboriginal land and have attempted to destroy Aboriginal culture, and the ongoing colonization of Turtle Island represents itself as a legitimate, normative, and legal reality in Western narratives. However, Abel's creative resistance responds to colonial discursive offenses and re-positions colonial words in new contexts that both condemn colonial strategies and underline Aboriginal subjectivity and self-determination. Rather than stealing, Abel's work represents colonial narratives through an Aboriginal voice in order to highlight colonial strategies of Aboriginal erasure and to testify to the presence of Aboriginal peoples and cultures.

Today, copying and remixing as cultural techniques have become controversial practices. Although there may be some negative views and criticisms about this technique by referring to the copyright laws, some scholars regard copying as an artistic model that contributes to the creation and re-creation of new and diverse works. Jan Verwoert, in "Living With Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art," argues that the process of copying and

appropriating historical works is “one of the most basic procedures of modern art production and education” (354). In the late twentieth century, along with postmodernism movements, appropriation is considered as a counter-culture practice that protests against race, gender, and sexuality. Bettina Funcke states:

During the late 1970s and 80s artists introduced formal, material appropriation as a critical, transformative tool; this moment also happened to be the dawn of neoliberalism and identity politics... appropriation in art now primarily implies cultural appropriation... [A]ppropriation means unlawfully taking from a rightful owner ‘under the guise of authority’, a phrase which may be taken as a pointed euphemism for the injustices of colonialism, racism, and patriarchy. In this sense, appropriation is a red thread going through the entire history of dispossession, oppression, and marginalization. (291)

What is important, according to Franz Thalmair, is the potential of artists using this generative process to create new contexts from the original text, where the permanent oscillation between the poles [original and copy] constitutes a self-reflexive practice (349). Thalmair argues in “Copying as Performative Research,” that the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde arts derive from “artistic processes such as collage and readymades to create new artifacts from found materials. With such forms of appropriation artists explicitly challenged and nuanced traditional categories like originality, authorship, or intellectual property” (Thalmair 348).

With these arguments in mind, I argue that Abel’s appropriation or re-appropriation can be considered as a process of re-creation since, despite the direct use of colonial texts, Abel offers new and different concepts. Although Abel’s works are directly inspired by Western-colonial texts, the concepts and meanings of his poems are independent (even opposite) of their sources. Due to the ongoing colonization of Turtle Island, Aboriginal peoples continue to suffer from the appropriation of their culture. Academic appropriation can be considered as “a means of

criticizing the white Western canon” (Mix 1440) to resist colonial cultural appropriation in the post-colonial period and re-appropriate their already appropriated culture by colonialism. Abel’s works, I argue, act as a conceptual and performative activism that contributes to re-contextualizing historical works by protesting against social, political, economic, and cultural injustices in modern society through irony and parody. His appropriation-based poems provide the space for Aboriginal nations to shift from the place of objectification to the place of agency. While Barbeau’s *Totem Poles* used the anthropological practice of appropriating, assimilating, and erasing Aboriginal cultures and nations, poetic appropriation becomes a transformative and critical tool for Abel to underline Aboriginal presence and reconstruct Aboriginal self-determination and identity. With the aim of cultural revitalization, Abel decodes colonial texts and reveals settlers’ aims of assimilation and erasure and communicates them to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. Abel’s appropriation is considered as a “shift from colonial appropriation to postcolonial recontextualization” (Mix 1443).

Moreover, Peter Bürger, in “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde,” engages in the concept of neo-avant-garde in the postmodern era. He argues that although avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and surrealism contributed to “the revolutionizing of life” (696), neo-avant-garde artists do not intend to attack or bring changes to the institution of art, rather, they deal with “the possibility of a reappropriation of all past artistic materials” (706). Pauline Butling also argues that avant-gardism is the process of making shifts through repetition. It is tied up with the prefix “re-”: “redefining, rewriting, reclaiming, rearticulating, reinventing, reterritorializing, and reformulating are some ways to change historical constructions and social positionings” (Butling 21). According to Butling, avant-garde art deals with all existing texts and re-situates them in new social and cultural frameworks. Avant-garde work raises questions rather than gives answers and pushes audiences to think and re-create the artwork according to their own interpretations.

Re-using colonial-historical works and adapting them to modern and postmodern models through an Aboriginal creative perspective can be considered a challenge for Abel in (re)producing radically new avant-garde artworks.

Abel's "watchword" poetry, in my opinion, more than avant-garde, can be considered as a "post-avant" literary production since he offers "a distinctive way of Making It New" through returning and revitalizing the past both materially and culturally (Perloff, "Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent" 129). Abel's creative technique of erasure (even if not avant-garde according to critics or Abel) brings "a new possibility of decolonization" of colonial-historical texts (Betts, "Seeing Visual Poetry in Canada" 4). Abel's "plunderverse poetry[.]" in Betts words, uses the multidimensional power of literary language and erasure to produce meaningful trajectories and to indigenize pre-existing colonial texts (5). Using Western-colonial texts as sources is Abel's original offering that directly challenges Western ideologies. Abel's works play a remarkable role in destabilizing the colonial image of the "Indian" both in Western and Aboriginal canon and of re-establishing the presence of Aboriginal peoples and cultures against imposed silence and absence. Abel employs colonial words against colonialism itself.

Today, reconciliation and recognition are political terms employed by colonial states to constitute new forms of previous strategies of assimilation, appropriation, and commodification within the neocolonial or postcolonial society of North America. In other words, the nature of colonialism is the same; however, the language of Imperialism has changed. This idea is discussed in *Red Skin, White Masks*, where Coulthard states: "contemporary colonialism works *through* rather than entirely *against* freedom" (156). Abel argues:

Indigenous resurgence isn't accessible to all Indigenous people. Just thinking about my own personal experience, I've had a very difficult time embracing Indigenous resurgence because of the way that colonialism has served and fractured my connection to my

Indigenous family and community... Again, though, resurgence is perhaps the best pathway forward for Indigenous peoples if we can overcome these hurdles. (“A Line Can Be Drawn: An Interview” 294)

I argue that Abel’s poetry, by countering what Coulthard calls “political recognition” (151), participates in Aboriginal resistance and responds positively to the urgent need for resurgence that, in turn, has the potential to both disrupt settler colonial practices and revitalize Aboriginal history and culture. Abel uses the dynamic power of language in order to creatively respond to the colonial “textual warfare” (LaRoque 38) of misrepresentation, assimilation, and cultural appropriation, as well as to reclaim and revitalize Aboriginal culture and history through an Aboriginal lens. Abel’s poetic performances ironically intervene in colonial texts to condemn ongoing forms of colonialism within Turtle Island. *The Place of Scraps* ends with a picture where there is a sign written on it: “Please STAY OUT of the Totem Pole Area” (255). Through this image, Abel ironically emphasizes the non-intervention of colonial states in Aboriginal issues. Due to the ongoing colonization of Turtle Island, Western methods of representation and recognition have obscured Aboriginal cultures and epistemologies. The first step towards reconciliation is, thus, decolonizing colonial history and reclaiming Aboriginal land and culture through Aboriginal voices. A true reconciliation “requires understanding history not as a linear series of events but as a layered presence; what lies beneath rocks in our gardens may be hidden or ignored but it is not gone” (Hargreaves and Jefferess 204).

**Chapter Two:**  
**Embodiment of Knowledge: Performance Art and Activist Media in the Aboriginal  
Resurgence Movement**

“The new in reality is brought only by the very questioning of reality that is inherent in Indigenous work. If you have been erased from public record, if your understanding of history has been ignored, if you have been vilified and marginalized by the mainstream of a society you automatically understand reality to be in the hands of those with the power to decide what is right, normal, just and legitimate. To question what is presented as natural, normal, simply reality is to question the way power is distributed in society. To question it is to create a new reality.”

Wanda Nanibush, “Love and Other Resistances” 173

“As Indigenous women writers and artists we are continually trying to exist, live, and love in a world that doesn’t always show its love for us. This means, part of the artist’s call is to turn past trauma on their heads, upside down, inside out, lift it up then put it back down as something changed and transformed so that others can find something beautiful or hopeful in it. For that beauty and hope to exist we as Native American women must dive headfirst into the muck, ugliness, stark darkness of that wreckage. This is what we do—we recast wounds in unending light. And so, light, love, and courage are circles we keep coming back to.”

Tanaya Winder, “In Her Words” 79

Stuart Hall, in “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” emphasizes the necessity of protesting against injustices. Hall argues that resisting marginalization and exclusion as well as re-territorialization and re-identification of suppressed identity depends on “the constitution of some defensive collective identity against the practices of racist society, ... [on the discovery of] some ground, some place, some position on which to stand, ... [and on] the recovery of lost histories. The histories that have never been told about ourselves that we could not learn in schools, that were not in any books, and that we had to recover” (52). Hall further argues that marginality is a powerful space for re-organizing and re-framing dynamic social, political, and cultural discourses as the stories told by marginal peoples can reveal hidden parts of history that have been deliberately ignored. Hall’s argument can also be reflected in Aboriginal resistance movements and cultural persistence strategies. I use Hall’s argument to assert that Aboriginal storytelling, as “a form of Knowledge” (Hulan and Eigenbrod 7), can be a valuable tool for Aboriginal cultures in re-identifying Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty, by returning to history and re-remembering the past stories preserved and transferred from generation to generation. By combining past histories with present ones, Aboriginal storytelling contributes to revealing the hidden part of Canadian history.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the visual storytelling of Anishinaabe performance artist Rebecca Belmore. I will explore how Belmore uses performance art as political activism to challenge colonial history and offer hope for Aboriginal resurgence and self-determination. By referring to arguments by Aboriginal writers such as Kim Anderson, Wanda Nanibush, and Lee-Ann Martin, I argue that Belmore’s silent body movements vocalize racism, violence, and socio-political events in colonial history that have affected Aboriginal language and culture. In the second part of this chapter, with a focus on Belmore’s performative artworks, especially *Fountain* and *Vigil*, I assert that Belmore combines Aboriginal storytelling with

contemporary technologies to interrogate stereotypical images imposed by colonial mainstream media and to generate a new epistemology of Aboriginal culture in Canadian social memory. I will also examine how places and materials in Belmore's performances are meaningful mediums to give voice to silent hi/stories and bring about change in society.

### **Anti-colonial Gestures and Political Protests within the Colonial State**

From the mid-1980s onward, performance art has demonstrated new directions in Aboriginal women's practices and has been used as a powerful medium of protest by Aboriginal women to restore Aboriginal cultures and reconstruct Aboriginal self-determination because "performance can excavate and bring to life those issues and images that do not fit within, or are systematically marginalized by, the dominant culture" (Bradley 121). In Jeanie Forte's words, women's performance art is "a deconstructive strategy" that protest against the objectification and absence of women in the patriarchal society (218). Women's performances are powerful means to directly challenge male subjectivity and to highlight female self-representation. Performers use the potential of bodies and performative practices to represent the "sacredness" of the Aboriginal female body and "create new images or undermine old ones" (Bradley 121). Performance is an embodied remembering that exposes and criticizes the stereotypical images of "Indian" to re-create history from a new and different perspective. In this way, performance provides alternative spaces for both self-representation and cultural representation. The presence of the female body as a "signifying practice" is one of the most powerful mediums in Aboriginal artworks because the female body responds to patriarchal theories, re-asserts Aboriginal world views, and underlines Aboriginal women's subjectivity and their independent identity (Threadgold 4). The Aboriginal female body also challenges the ongoing myth of "vanishing Indianness." Performance art and Aboriginal presence within social sites make Aboriginal female



bodies both visible and undeniable. Aboriginal performance art contributes to embodying Aboriginal presence and cultural survival, re-forming Aboriginal women's identity, undermining Western-colonial patriarchy, and bringing about the possibility of social change.

Gender separation is a dialectical process that comes from the patriarchal discourse of colonial culture. By imposing "moral boundaries between private and public space" (Wesley-Esquimaux 17), society deprived women of their social rights within Western male-centered society and were pushed to marginal positions and private spaces. Conventional social norms have classified society into two different categories of "masculinity" or/and "femininity." Judith Butler argues that there is a deep connection between this social categorization and racial discourses:

If ... women of colour are 'multiply interpellated,' called by many names, constituted in and by that multiple calling, then this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of racializing norms, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another. Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them fully sexual axes of social regulation and power. (qtd. in Threadgold 6)

As gender separation was one of the injustices of Indian Residential Schools, this racist separation has affected the mental health of the Aboriginal children who suffered under this colonial practice. Aboriginal children were taught "to stay away and not be touching"; they were not even allowed to hug or touch their siblings (Knockwood 159). The jobs and tasks given to children in residential schools were linked to their gender. Allocating hard labour for Aboriginal boys, such as milking cows, cleaning barns, and making shoes (Knockwood 57-60), led to position men in the public sphere and closer to the center of power, given the power of wage labour within capitalism. In contrast, limiting the girls to domestic labour, such as working in the

kitchen and making bread, or working in laundry and washing and ironing the sheets (Knockwood 60-66), instilled a sense of inferiority in Aboriginal girls and ultimately excluded Aboriginal women from public discourses of society and wage labour, and moved them to the margins. Yet, before the arrival of newcomers, rather than gender orientation, the foundation of families in Aboriginal cultures was based on “the gender complementarity between Indigenous women and men” (Suzack 262). Traditional Aboriginal social norms come from the contact with Mother Earth and spirituality, were based on a relationship with nature, as “the repositories of cultural knowledge” (Wesley-Esquimaux 18), and Aboriginal men and women shared domestic labour and their social responsibilities. Aboriginal women had critical roles and responsibilities in Aboriginal communities such as healers, hunters, intellectuals, nurturers, and warriors. In some communities, like the Okanagan, women were even the “primary forces” and leaders of tribes (Anderson 99). From an Aboriginal holistic worldview, as Sylvia Maracle argues, “[a woman is] not somebody’s possession, not a belonging, not a negative concept. [You refer to her] in the purest, most respectful way you can” (qtd. in Anderson 109).

Colonization was a gendered project. Colonial states attempted to destroy Aboriginal cultures and reconstruct Aboriginal societies to fit into a patriarchal structure. Due to the lack of understanding or deliberate denial of Aboriginal culture, patriarchal power disrupted Aboriginal cultures and placed Aboriginal women in marginal positions. Consequently, Aboriginal women experienced their disempowerment and devaluation in political, social, and cultural spheres. Leanne Simpson, in *As We Have Always Done*, writes: “The state had a strong interest in assimilating Indigenous bodies into the gendered roles of European females and males and infusing Indigenous families with the hierarchy of heteropatriarchy” (11). Okanagan writer, artist, and activist Jeannette Armstrong affirms the equality of men and women in Aboriginal worldviews:

In the Okanagan, as in many Native tribes, the order of life learning is that you are born without sex and as a child, through learning, you move toward full capacity as either male or female. Only when appropriately prepared for the role do you become a man or woman. The natural progression into parenthood provides immense learning from each other, the love, compassion and cooperation necessary to maintain family and community. Finally as an elder you emerge as both male and female, a complete human, with all skills and capacities complete. (qtd. in Gray 270)

Gender separation is a Western legacy “because these men [Western Missionaries] were coming from a place where women were inferior to men” (Wesley-Esquimaux 16). In Western cosmology, women are considered as “idle” and exist for the enjoyment of men. Based on Western religious and hierarchical perspective, “a woman’s proper place was under the authority of her husband and that a man’s proper place was under the authority of the priests” (Wesley-Esquimaux 16). This kind of differentiation and discrimination, however, did not exist in “the First Nations belief system” (17). In her interview with Kim Anderson, Armstrong emphasizes that the Okanagan language is a “non-gender-biased” language as there are not any male or female pronouns: “You can’t point to that person and say ‘she’ or ‘he’. You can only point to that person based on how they are related to us, or how they are related to other things. You could say ‘my aunt’, or you could say ‘that person who is my teacher’ or ‘that person who is selling me goods’” (Anderson109).

Aboriginal peoples, especially Aboriginal women, were forced to respect new and completely different socio-cultural norms of Western society that led them to marginal positions. Wesley-Esquimaux, in “Trauma to Resilience,” states: “Contact and colonization had an equally destructive impact on men, but the most immediate and least discussed damage radiated from the heart and center of the family –the woman– and temporarily shattered the hoop that ensured

balance in life” (13). Anderson argues that “Native females have been subjected not only to racist notions of the ‘savage’, but to the sexist notion of a debased womanhood. To be Native was uncivilized; to be female was inferior; but to be a combination of the two was particularly base” (117). Considering women as the second sex was one of sexual crimes enacted upon Aboriginal women that led them to lose their identity. In other words, the duality between their Aboriginal cognitive map, where women profited from a high level of value, and settler legislation caused the dual identity among Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women were forced to forget their traditional cosmology and live in accordance with the “rigid heteropatriarchal gender binary and strict gender roles” of colonial culture (Simpson 110).

Colonialism’s gender separation brought about “a duality of mind and body that forced a separation of self from spirit, a concept alien to the communal philosophy of Aboriginal people” (Wesley-Esquimaux 17). The promotion of patriarchal culture is considered, in Simpson’s terms, as “dispossession” and “genocide” (Simpson 97). She argues that Western-colonial missionaries attempted to “remove us from political influence in our communities and our nations and to position us as ‘less than’ our male counterparts. They were out to destroy our agency, self-determination, body sovereignty, and freedom and to contain us under the colonial heteropatriarchy within which they lived and used to have power over us” (Simpson 97).

This cultural practice of appropriation and marginalization provided the space for the colonial state’s superiority and domination. Invaders, through an autocratic power, have deliberately ignored Aboriginal values and silenced their voices to distort Aboriginal oral hi/stories and, in this way, appropriate Aboriginal cultures, lands, and natural resources. Coulthard, in “From Wards of the State to Subjects of Recognition?,” points to this issue and argues that all new strategies of negotiations and reconciliation are the politics of the state to “facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their land and self-determining authority”

and contribute to the reinforcement of the “colonial relationship” and development of capitalism, imperialism, and settlement (57). By referring to Karl Marx’s economic theory, Coulthard argues that: “these formative acts of dispossession are what initially set the stage for capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production by tearing Indigenous societies, peasants, and other small-scale agricultural producers from the source of their livelihood— namely, the land” (58). The issue of re-appropriation can also be understood in Tuck and Yang’s article, “Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor,” where they point out to the “total appropriation of Indigenous life and land” (5) by settler colonialism and argue that decolonization is “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (1) that “requires the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people” (26).

Kim Anderson, in *A Recognition of Being*, interviews forty Aboriginal women and surveys the status of Aboriginal women in the past, in their traditional culture, and after colonization. She starts her book with a quotation by Mi’kmaq writer, film producer, and director Catherine Martin: “The situation that we are in today is such that our women and children aren’t respected as they used to be. It is not the fault of the men. It is because of the layers and layers of influence we have had from another culture” (xxiii). After years of dehumanization, Aboriginal women have decided to resist “the misogynist paradigms” (Anderson 110) and “reclaim their traditional female political authority” (195) by re-defining their “Native womanhood,” which, as Anderson argues, lies in the connections to family, community, land, spirituality, language, and storytelling (116-136). Aboriginal women have become aware of their inferior social, political, and cultural conditions and have begun resisting. In Wesley-Esquimaux words:

Today, First Nations women are beginning to understand that many of the social problems they deal with every day have roots in the extensive historic trauma that was experienced, but never properly voiced out and represented. The metanarrative of the Western world

simply did not include the indigenous story of loss, impermanence, and socially debilitating marginalization. (20)

Aboriginal women attempt to find their voice in order to speak out against colonial injustices and bring about change in the future:

The future of our families, communities, nations, and planet depend on us finding our voices, nurturing ourselves, and reclaiming our authority and power. Women are installed with the responsibility to speak out about injustice and they must act in positive ways to address those things in need of direction. (Anderson 214)

Anderson emphasizes the necessity of recognition and reclamation of past stories as a source of power by Aboriginal women in order to challenge stereotypical images and restore Aboriginal culture because, as Candice Hopkins argues, “[i]n Native culture, stories are not simply stories. They are told and re-told so that they resonate in the present, not as myths and legends, but as a vital part of history. They teach critical lessons and cultural values, like bravery and the necessity of communication” (“How to Get Indians Into An Art Gallery” 196). Poka Laenui, in “Process of Decolonization,” asserts that the first step in the process of decolonization is rediscovery and recovery of the past that “sets the foundation for the eventual decolonization of the society” (152). In other words, the first step in regaining self-determination and subjectivity is the indigenizing of “minds and spirits” (Wesley-Esquimaux 27) by moving away from the colonial perspective and turning towards an Aboriginal world-view. The revitalization of Aboriginal traditional knowledge and stories contributes to acknowledging and reinforcing the collective power to survive and restore Aboriginal culture. Through a retrospective lens, Aboriginal women turn to the past and reclaim their oral hi/stories in order to revitalize their lost culture and identity. Aboriginal women’s practices in storytelling are different from those of men because “[t]hey play prominent roles in their communities, they teach, they heal, they tell stories, they set directions,

and they develop social and economic frameworks” (Wesley-Esquimaux 27). In this regard, I argue that, beyond resituating “Native womanhood,” Aboriginal women’s resistance contributes to the revitalization of Aboriginal knowledge and traditions that provides the space for Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination in the future.

In the post-residential school era, Aboriginal women have used various mediums of representation, including film, video, photography, and performance art, to challenge stereotypes imposed on them by the dominant culture and to re-define their individual and collective identity. Aboriginal art is not separated from Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal peoples create art in their daily activities as it penetrates through all the layers of their culture. Vivian Gray asserts: “The appreciation of art among Aboriginal people is evident not only in our beautiful cultural objects of the past and present, but in our languages, dances, songs, and storytelling” (268). In the same vein, Simona Arnatsiaq, in her interview with Kim Anderson, states:

How can we have self-government without joy, without arts? You can’t have a building spring up one day—a government house with a whole bunch of politicians running around—without pride. You have to have arts. You have got to reclaim your identity. You have got to have song. And that is something I would love to see more of. (Anderson 122)

Artistic practices are crucial ways for “healing and identity recovery” among contemporary Aboriginal women within Western patriarchal society, and contribute to “reclaiming their voice in the private and public spheres” (Anderson 120).

In the 1970s, along with the international feminist movement that “left its strongest legacy on art” (Chadwick 378), Aboriginal women turned to art as a powerful weapon of their resistance. Their works contain a wide range of practices including painting, sculpture, photography, and performance art. Due to the intense development of Aboriginal art and culture in the mid-twentieth century, the 1960s can be considered as “revival or renaissance of First

Nations cultures” (Gray 271). During this period Aboriginal artists, especially visual and performing artists “as strong voices in the political and social spheres” (271), employed their art as the medium to creatively reclaim Aboriginal knowledge and culture, because, in Janet Rogers’ words, “the reality of who we are lives inside our art and our culture” (253). Their works contributed to (re)turning to their traditional Aboriginal resources to draw cultural differences between colonial and Aboriginal communities to re-define Aboriginal individual and collective identities and reconstruct Aboriginal sovereignty in the future. Aboriginal women’s visual representations challenged the political concept of multiculturalism and addressed the biased history of colonialism and the issues of race and racial stereotypes, as well as the strategies of assimilation and cultural appropriation. They also reclaim traditional Aboriginal hi/stories and restore Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal women’s creative expressions, rather than focusing on individual issues, are important methods for “finding their way home” (Wesley-Esquimaux 27) to deal with collective and cultural identity. Such works highlight the relationships between individual and community. Lee-Ann Martin, in *Divergences*, argues that “Aboriginal women carry specific cultural knowledge and, as such, are the caretakers of their cultures” (12). Their art becomes necessary for the continuity of a “vital, dynamic community” (12). By extending beyond the boundaries of Western art theories, Aboriginal women artists use their own selves to re-imagine colonial history and reclaim Aboriginal cultural identity through an exploration of memory.

I argue that performance is a crucial decolonizing vehicle for Belmore to share Aboriginal oral hi/stories and to subvert the Western legacy of the objectification of women and reclaim “Native womanhood” by focusing on Aboriginal female bodies as a means of challenging erasure and devaluation under colonial patriarchy. As a protest to the double marginalization of Aboriginal women in Canada (Anderson 117), Belmore uses her female Aboriginal body, as



symbolic medium, to unfold the ongoing violence and colonialism against Aboriginal communities and especially Aboriginal women. Belmore's performance art transforms silence into a powerful means to speak beyond language. In place of speaking in colonial languages, body movement is an alternative language for Belmore to visually narrate the hi/stories of Aboriginal traumas. Her embodied storytelling recalls memory and past hi/stories in order to decolonize Eurocentric discourses and reconstruct Aboriginal self-determination. As a form of testimony, her performative practices underline the presence of "vanished" peoples and gives voice to generations of Aboriginal peoples. Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, validates this idea:

*Unmarked* attempts to find a theory of value for that which is not "really" there ... [and] examines the implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and political power which have been a dominant force in cultural theory in the last ten years. Among the challenges this poses is how to retain the power of the unmarked by surveying it within a theoretical frame. By exposing the blind spot within the theoretical frame itself, it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim. (2-3)

Between the 1960s and 1970s, performance art was a common art of protest for marginalized groups and minorities, especially women, to highlight both their presence and their subject position as "it poses an actual woman as a speaking subject" (Forte 220). Roselee Goldberg describes performance art as a reaction to censorship started with Italian futurists "to express the mood of a period" by combining various disciplines such as dance, music, painting, and sculpture (373). Grounded in postmodern contexts, contemporary performance art is tied up with the prefix of 're-'. It re-creates, re-presents, re-signifies, and reclaims existing discourses in new

perspectives in order to challenge and remove the complexities of conventional boundaries and stereotypes imposed by the dominant culture.

Belmore's exploration and embodiment of memory, in my opinion, is an important medium for revitalizing Aboriginal culture and strengthening collective power. Her work makes invisible presences and voices visible. Based on the tradition of storytelling, Belmore's performance art is a medium of generating and expressing Aboriginal knowledge and traditions. "[R]ooted in [Aboriginal] storytelling through a language of actions and images" (Bradley 127), her performance practices attempt to make a connection "between the traditional material language of her people and the multiple internationalist languages of art today" (Bradley 121). Belmore recovers Aboriginal cultures and traditions within the contemporary hegemonic society and the combination of performative storytelling and technology in Belmore's practices makes new and innovative spaces of resistance and generates discussions about social, political, and cultural change. Belmore uses her body as a site of resistance, intervention, and persistence that reveals the layers and hidden parts of colonial history and reclaims Aboriginal identity. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states:

Belmore's body is her art... When Belmore enters a space to perform or even to give an artist talk, she does so in a way that emanates Nishnaabeg sovereignty and self-determination to a degree that I've only witnessed in elders. She comes into space with grounded power as a provocateur and agent who is not a victim. She is intervention. She is theory. She is both the presence and the doorway, and in her performances she often gives birth to the flight paths out of settler colonial reality and then literally takes those flight paths in front of the audience as witness. (203)

Rather than situating Belmore's performative productions in the feminist art history, I argue that her practices are creative forms of unsettling colonial history by re-"storying" Aboriginal history.

Belmore declares that she does not consider herself as a “feminist” artist but as a woman of the Anishinaabe people and if there is any trace of feminism in her works “it is because it’s done by me, my person, my body, and I think that with my body I can address history, the immediate and political issues. For me performance is deeply personal, because it’s my way of speaking out” (“Global Feminisms: Rebecca Belmore”). The body is Belmore’s language to reconstruct her own identity, and by extension, to re-create Aboriginal self-determination in the present world. Belmore creates a plural self by referring to her personal self. Jessica Bradley combines Belmore’s performance art and feminist approach by stating that: “The narrative that runs through her performances often honours women, their work and their role in maintaining cultural legacies, but always in the context of the historical displacements and contemporary cultural self-determination of First Nations people” (Bradley124).

Wanda Nanibush, in “Love and Other Resistance,” valorizes the act of remembering and recalling past stories in creating and re-creating new meanings. She argues that memory is “vague” and is not retrievable in detail. Each person (re)creates the past stories in his/her own interpretation from history. In this regard, the practice of remembering can be considered as a process of art-making (170). Based on re-remembering past hi/stories, Belmore’s practices, through “active interpretation of the past for the present” (Nanibush, “Love and Other Resistances” 170), bring alternative meanings to Canadian cultural memory. Belmore’s remembering of past stories from an Aboriginal perspective unfolds a new face of history that has been deliberately hidden by settler society. Belmore fills the “gap between community remembering and government forgetting” (171) by connecting “history-making and performative storytelling” (173). Her acts of remembering and re-telling of old stories is a constructive repetition that bears witness to colonial violence and a distorted history. Belmore also underlines the transformative power of Aboriginal storytelling in restoring Aboriginal sovereignty across

Turtle Island. In other words, Belmore's recalling of old stories is essential for re-imagining Aboriginal identity in the present and to re-construct Aboriginal agency in the future. Coulthard, in *Red Skin, White Masks*, deals with the relationship between the process of decolonization and Aboriginal self-affirmation. He argues that reclaiming traditional storytelling "as a source of strength, an emergent consciousness, and a foundation for collective action" (146) is an important step in Aboriginal resurgence and argues for "a resurgent approach to Indigenous decolonization that builds on the value and insights of our past in our efforts to secure a noncolonial present and future" (149).

There is a bridge between Belmore's performance art and Aboriginal storytelling as her art is a practice of political protest and intervention as well as a means to cultural survival and resurgence. Traditional stories reinforce collective empowerment and they offer a path towards the future by recalling the sovereign histories of Aboriginal peoples. Stories both represent and preserve Aboriginal traditional knowledge, language, history, and philosophy: "Our stories are unadulterated version of our history and creation. They are critical for Native people who seek a sense of identity founded within Native culture" (Anderson 110). Belmore performs Aboriginal oral stories in physical and visual ways by integrating memory, technology, and body. Belmore's recalling of historical events not only uncovers Western-colonial bias towards its own history, but also reconstructs Aboriginal self-determination by revitalizing Aboriginal knowledge and history. Poka Laenui states:

True decolonization is more than simply placing Indigenous or previously colonized people into the positions held by colonizers. Decolonization includes the re-evaluation of the political, social, economic, and judicial structures themselves and the development, if appropriate, of new structures that can hold and house the values and aspiration of the colonized people. (155)

Laenui's definition of decolonization supports Belmore's practices as a form of participation in the process of decolonization in that they offer the possibility of the resurgence of Aboriginal sovereignty in the future. Her practices, as performative forms of storytelling, are associated with cultural survival, resurgence, and self-affirmation against colonialism. Belmore's performance art has the potential to produce creative political encounters between Indigeneity and colonialism. In spite of the fact that mainstream media "marginalizes or excludes Aboriginal cultures, voices, and ways of knowing[,]" this "cultural racism" can be eradicated or at least undermined through reclamation of Aboriginal knowledge and philosophy in their own perspective (Battiste, "Maintaining Aboriginal Identity" 193).

Belmore does not consider herself as either a "political" or a "decolonizing" agent; rather, she states: "I prefer to think of what we do today, as artists, is simple: to be ourselves" (Nanibush, "An Interview with Rebecca Belmore" 216). However, I argue that Belmore's performances are acts of decolonial protest by using her body, challenging Western-colonial patriarchy, and undermining stereotypical images. Her visual productions, based on Aboriginal knowledge, cultures, and cosmology, valorize the Aboriginal female body, and bring about changes in Canadian-colonial cultural and social memory.

### **Representing the Self, Cultural Representation**

Rebecca Belmore's multi-disciplinary artworks contain the various fields of photography, installation, sculpture, and video. Through a multi-dimensional approach, Belmore's work shifts between various media; she combines natural materials, such as water, wind, earth, and fire, as well as her own body and technologies of film and video installation to explore the Aboriginal interpretation of "social, political, and historical issues that impact Aboriginal Nations as well as the larger population" (Martin et al. 4). Maggie Tate considers Belmore's performances to be

“relational and transformational aesthetics” in terms of “foreground[ing] social contexts and the human interactions that take place within them [to] produce a network of social relations, both in the physical space of aesthetic experience and in the conceptual understandings of social relations at multiple sites and scales” (21-2).

Belmore’s *Fountain* is a video installation that brought her national and international recognition. Lee-Ann Martin argues that *Fountain* is “a potent symbol of power and identity, ... a symbolic oasis in the arid environment of colonial relations” (“The Waters of Venice” 48-50). *Fountain* was filmed on Iona Beach near Vancouver, Canada, and was screened in Venice, Italy, at Venice’s Biennale contemporary art exhibition. The video projection is divided into five scenes. The flames of fire in the first shot represent a cold winter day with a grey sky over a grey ocean that Belmore walks past along the shore. The next shot shows Belmore struggling with a bucket in the water. Belmore is then walking again along the beach, coming towards the viewers carrying the heavy bucket. The artist and surroundings are in a deep silence that reminds viewers of the silence imposed on Aboriginal peoples. The artist then stops suddenly and throws the contents of the bucket towards the lens of the camera, which is not water, but a red liquid. The red blood then drips down the lens of the camera, highlighting both the performative nature of the piece as well as the mediated position of the viewer. In the final scene, Belmore is standing and staring directly at the camera in a self-determined position with the lens covered by the blood. The audience sees Belmore gazing at the camera and at viewers with a daring and combative look that actively encourages Aboriginal resistance and invites non-Aboriginal viewers to re-evaluate the stereotypical images and negative representations of Aboriginal identity, culture, and history.

In *Fountain*, Belmore’s body acts as both “tool and media” (McCall 99). That is to say that Belmore’s body, as proof of a living being, undermines the assumptions of the vanished race and vocalizes Aboriginal presence and identity. Her performance shows that, in spite of suffering

painful and traumatic experiences, Aboriginal peoples have resisted and survived. Colonial crimes against Aboriginal bodies and cultures are embodied in Belmore's own body in the piece, including the weight of history represented by the bucket, and the accumulation of loss in the image of the blood. Her embodied remembrance creates "a corporeal experience for the spectator" (Otto 98) and invites both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewers to be witnesses and to testify to Aboriginal presence. *Fountain* is a symbolic piece that, as Bradley argues, "gives presence to her people's struggles for their own identity" (124). Belmore's work and her body create a bridge between the past and present with the hope of establishing a dynamic and sovereign future.

The proximity of the Vancouver airport to the beach used in the production of *Fountain*, and the grey water and the sewage pipes sloping into the ocean, reveals that the pollution of water is the legacy of colonialism and industrialization. These images also imply the colonization of the land and Belmore underlines that, besides colonizing Aboriginal peoples and cultures, Aboriginal land, as the source of power and wealth, has been sacrificed by settler-colonizers. Melina Labouan-Massimo declares:

And now we are experiencing a new wave of colonialism, continuing the assault on our communities, our land, and our traditional and sustainable way of life. ... Now we are fighting against corporations and complicit governments who see our lands as a "resource" that can be torn apart, carved out, her roots ripped up to drain her life-blood. Human beings have become so disconnected from their Mother that they fail to see how truly fragile we are, how dependent we are upon her for our survival. (214)

In *Fountain*, Belmore's struggle in the water symbolizes the idea of transformation, revitalization, and rebirth. The artist struggles to come to consciousness in order to survive. She attempts to return to life, regain power, and rebuild her Aboriginal identity. Her effort alludes to

the collective struggle of Aboriginal nations caught between the extremes of life and death, anger and hope, silence and speaking the truth to release Aboriginal peoples from ongoing colonial oppression and removing stereotypical images imposed on Aboriginal culture and history in order to reconstruct Aboriginal self-determination. Rather than merely gathering water in her bucket, the woman attempts to regain her Aboriginal identity by relying on the power of water. Belmore creatively uses the water's life-giving power to release herself from the "hostile terrain of colonial history" (Martin, "The Waters of Venice" 50). Belmore asserts: "Traditionally the world is thought to rest on water and the underwater world is full of spiritual powers that need to be respected" (Belmore et al.26). Connection to the land is crucial for Aboriginal peoples and especially Aboriginal women aiming to reconstruct their fractured identity. Jeannette Armstrong states: "I know that without my land and my people I am not alive. I am simply flesh waiting to die" (qtd. in Anderson 106). Kim Anderson underlines the power of revivification of the water in Aboriginal philosophy. She argues that water "represents life, it has spirit, it is sentient, and it can heal" (Anderson 201). Sylvie Maracle also considers water as "the strongest force on the earth" and states that "we know that water comes first before life itself. We know it has responsibilities to cleanse us, to quench us, to nourish our thirst; that it is also responsible to allow us to sit beside it to find peace" (qtd. in Anderson 163).

*Fountain* is Belmore's testimony. It testifies to the violence, oppression, and silence that ongoing colonialism has imposed on Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal woman in the water encounters and struggles with traumatic experiences. Dori Laub, the American psychiatrist, in referring to the Holocaust, considers testimonies as imperative tools for uncovering the buried truth as well as healing and reconciling the present world. Laub declares:

The testimony is inherently a process of facing loss —of going through the pain of the act of witnessing, and of the ending of the act of witnessing— which entails yet another



repetition of the experience of separation and loss. It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it. (74)

Despite living in a society, the victims of trauma are almost always alone, because the untold stories are like the barriers between the survivors and other members of society. In the same vein, Keavy Martin, in “Truth, Reconciliation, and Amnesia,” asserts that although “eventual and complete amnesia” (57) is not possible, “[i]n order to heal, to be forgiven, or to reconcile, we must first re-open wounds, recount sins, and resurrect conflicts. In order to forget, we must remember” (51). These emphases on bearing witness not only reveal the importance of testifying but also demonstrate that the past is not erasable, as the implications of the past (whether positive or negative) are seen in the present and future. In connecting Laub’s and Martin’s points I argue that Belmore’s testimony contributes to the unfolding of the layers of violent colonial history and, at the same time, catalyzes the healing process in re-constructing Aboriginal identity. In other words, Aboriginal trauma, however painful, should be re-told because “unresolved” physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual traumas can cause “generational, intergenerational or multigenerational grief” (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 3). Aboriginal peoples’ iteration or re-representation of traumatic experiences not only reveals the hidden part of colonial history, but also acts as a tool of healing that can contribute to reconciliation in the future.

The woman struggling in the water arrives at self-knowledge through trauma. Belmore’s journey into the past reveals the buried history suppressed during hundreds of years of colonialism. Belmore connects the present to the past and future; she learns from the past to (re-)construct the future. According to Belmore, *Fountain* is the process of “renewal” and “transformation” (Belmore et al. 27-8). Beyond a process of individual healing, her performance contributes to Aboriginal collective self-determination and shows that Aboriginal peoples can

survive, heal, and re-imagine their identity by reclaiming and restoring Aboriginal knowledge and maintaining their relationships with the land.

At the end of the performance, by transforming water into blood, Belmore reminds viewers that the scars of Aboriginal peoples are still vivid and painful as she enacts her rage at racism and colonialism in silence, by throwing blood towards viewers. Blood takes on a dual role in Belmore's *Fountain*. It symbolizes colonial violence and trauma, and, at the same time, survival and resistance. On the one hand, the flowing blood on the lens of the camera is a reminder of the idea of the death of Aboriginal peoples and their culture. Belmore emphasizes that there is a wall of blood between colonizers and Aboriginal peoples: the blood of Vancouver's missing women; the blood of Residential School students who died in escaping from the school or under the torture of priests and nuns; the blood of people who died from hardship and poverty. She challenges and criticizes colonial states for their responsibility in the murder of Aboriginal people. However, by transforming the content of the bucket into blood, "water becomes the blood of life" (Belmore et al.74). It represents the idea of resistance, survival and new beginnings. As the blood slides down the screen and away, Belmore emerges standing and staring at viewers as a witness to Aboriginal "survival." Belmore responds to mainstream discourses of denial and highlights Aboriginal presence and resistance. Her gaze towards the camera foregrounds the fact that Aboriginal peoples are still present and reconstructing their self-determination and sovereignty. The woman's gaze speaks to both Aboriginal and settler audiences that "[t]his is my beginning. This is my radical resurgent present" (Simpson 10). In other words, in place of a sign of absence, the red of the blood is "an indication of absolute and long-standing presence" (Rice 53).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The transformation of water into blood clearly signals Christian imagery of "fountains of blood" and Christ's wounds. Although Belmore probably does not want to focus on Christianity in *Fountain* as a linear narrative

*Fountain* acts as a means of restoring traditional knowledge, healing, and Aboriginal collective power. Belmore, as an active agent, moves away from individual experience towards cultural representation. She faces the past to re-discover Aboriginal identity in the present and envisions Aboriginal sovereignty in the future. *Fountain* is a symbol of the re-appearance of Aboriginal peoples who had never left. Belmore's exploration of memory bears witness to the presence of Aboriginal nations and deconstructs the myth of the disappearing and the vanishing Indian.

The theme of disappearance and memory is also explored in *Vigil*, a performance piece that was part of *The Named and the Unnamed* exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in 2003. *Vigil* is a thirty-minute performance piece performed in the strategic location of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in 2002, where Belmore, through "the retraumatization of the body" (Tate 27), recalls colonial violence inflicted on Aboriginal nations and especially Aboriginal women. Belmore's *Vigil* employs colonial discourses and historical memory in re-remembering the tragic events of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. It interrogates colonial states for the 1181 missing and murdered Aboriginal women—predominately street-level sex-workers—or in Emmanuelle Walter's words, "épidémie d'assassinats," during the last thirty years in Canada (13). The piece challenges the settler government and its media apathy in this disappearance.

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connection, in my opinion, her imagery of transforming water into blood can be syncretic to Christian religious beliefs of rebirth during Eucharist and the colonial missionary work that led to residential schools and Indigenous trauma. The blood is associated with Christ's physical suffering, and, at the same time; it reminds the transformation of wine into the blood of Jesus Christ during the Eucharist and the last supper of Christ with his disciples. Sacrificing himself, Christ's shedding blood symbolizes salvation, liberation, and healing. It represents the unity between Jesus and his companions. A kind of rebirth, revivification, continuity, and new life originate from his blood: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life" (Leviticus 17:11).

*Vigil* begins with Belmore scrubbing and cleaning the sidewalk with soap and water, a sidewalk that represents the colonial crimes and atrocities against Aboriginal missing and murdered women. Belmore attempts to cleanse “the devaluation of Aboriginal Women’s lives; the material and emotional filth of a neighborhood rife with drug use, prostitution, and the abduction and murder of sex workers” (Berlo and Phillips 340). Relying on the power of “purification” of the water, derived from her Aboriginal cosmology, she scrubs away the colonial violence against Aboriginal peoples and removes the dust from history to unearth buried memories (Bradley 121). Moreover, her act of cleaning the site of her performance “makes the ground available for a hospitable reception for the ghosts of the disappeared women” (Tate 26). Belmore also reinforces this idea of respecting Aboriginal victims by lighting candles to commemorate the memory of missing Aboriginal women. Belmore then yells the names of the missing women, which are written with a black marker on her arm. After calling each name she brutally rips a flower between her clenched teeth in order to recall “the cruelty leading towards the violent destruction of the women’s lives and bodies and the ignorance and oblivion of the public that followed, contrasted with the grief of the women’s families” (Otto 97). She then puts on a long red dress, which recalls the blood of these “forgotten” women, and evokes both concepts of death and life (as the memories of these missing and murdered women are always alive among Aboriginal nations). Belmore nails the dress to a telephone pole and then tries to tear it by pulling the dress free from the pole. She repeats this act of nailing and ripping the dress until the dress is completely torn. Belmore then washes her face and arms and dresses in a pair of jeans and a tank top. In the final scene, Belmore emerges with her jeans and tank top leaning on a truck and looking quietly at viewers while the song *It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World* by James Brown can be heard from the open window of the truck. In this scene, Belmore challenges passive

audiences who are watching colonial violence and invites them to react against ongoing injustices<sup>18</sup>.

*Vigil* is Belmore's protest against the act of violence against Aboriginal women. She angrily depicts the grief and pain endured by Aboriginal women from the circle of colonial violence that has surrounded them. The mainstream media has negatively stereotyped Vancouver's missing and murdered Aboriginal women, and Belmore's performance attempts to disrupt prevailing images in order to reframe Aboriginal lives within Canadian cultural and social memory. She uses her own body to address the disappeared bodies of Aboriginal women and she puts her body through pain to represent the suffering that the women endured. Stephanie Springgay's argument affirms this idea when she states that "[t]rough her own body Belmore embodies the crimes committed against the native body, the woman's body, and the social body. Her performance does not claim to speak 'for' the missing women, nor about their lives and experiences, but rather weighs heavy with the flesh of the body" (5). Belmore makes space in her work for Aboriginal women to vocalize their anger against mainstream society for its apathy towards the phenomenon of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Tearing up the long red dress, ripping the roses with thorns between clenched teeth, writing the names of the women on her arm, and yelling the names make a connection between Belmore's body and the bodies of missing and murdered women who experienced violence, pain, and trauma. I argue that calling and yelling the names of missing and murdered Aboriginal women is the most challenging part of *Vigil* where Belmore, by making her body react in pain, embodies the atrocities endured by missing and murdered women. She criticizes the indifference of colonial media towards the tragic

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<sup>18</sup> For images of *Vigil* and Belmore's other works and performances see Rebecca Belmore's website: <https://www.rebeccabelmore.com>

event of disappeared Aboriginal women and underlines that they are not forgotten in Aboriginal history:

After each name is called, she draws a flower between her teeth, stripping it of blossom and leaf, just as the lives of these forgotten and dispossessed women were shredded in the teeth of indifference. Belmore lets each woman know that she is not forgotten: her spirit is evoked and she is given life by the power of naming. (“Vigil”)

Calling the women’s names foregrounds the vivacity of this traumatic experience in Aboriginal hi/story and gives voice to silenced and ignored perspectives. Belmore, as “a young woman in a red dress on a street corner[,]” embodies one of the sex workers or “prostitutes” who protest against the apathy of the colonial government and the inaction of the police (McCall 106).

What attracts attention in *Vigil* is the contrast between Belmore’s chosen outfits: the long red dress, which is a symbol of women’s seduction (or prostitution in this particular performance), set against jeans and a tank top that symbolize a male subject. The artist draws viewers’ attention to sexual and social discriminations within a patriarchal and hegemonic society. In the final scene, Belmore, in jeans and T-shirt leaning on the truck, emerges in the role of a “client.” This scene suggests that rather than a “true” or “authentic” identity, Aboriginal women are considered within a “discourse of desire” by white “male-dominated society” (Haugo 127; Forte 218). Belmore’s struggle in ripping the red dress alludes to Aboriginal women’s efforts in releasing themselves from stereotypical images of “prostitute,” “squaw,” or “whore” imposed by the dominant culture. In *Remembering Vancouver’s Disappeared Women*, Amber Dean asserts:

In order to understand the extremely high rates of violence against Indigenous women, then, we have to interrogate how western frameworks for understanding what it means to be a “self”, and in particularly liberal humanist assumptions about rational, freely

choosing autonomous selfhood, are profoundly implicated in the continuation of such violence. (11)

I argue that *Vigil* is the substantiation and embodiment of Amber Dean's argument and that the violence against Aboriginal women is rooted in patriarchal Western ideology and sexual discrimination.

Vancouver's missing and murdered women have typically been represented as addicts and prostitutes by the dominant media. Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young, in "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourse," investigate 128 articles on missing and murdered Indigenous women from 2001 to 2006 and assert that Aboriginal women are victims of mainstream media's stereotypical representations and are depicted as "deviant bodies" (899) who had a "'high-risk' lifestyle" (909). The dominant culture has deliberately ignored historical and social causes that led Aboriginal women to marginal positions. Instead of investigating the origin of this social phenomenon, mainstream media conveys the impression that the lives of these women are not of value by focusing on the negative aspects of sex work. Sheren Razack, in "Gendered Racial Violence and Specialized Justice," deals with the biased reports of colonial media and emphasizes their indifference with regard to Aboriginal women's lives: "Newspaper records of the the 19<sup>th</sup> century indicate that there was a conflation of Aboriginal woman and prostitute and an accompanying belief that when they encountered violence, Aboriginal women simply got what they deserved. Police seldom intervened, even when the victims' cries could be clearly heard" (99). The dominant society, by de-valoring sex work as immoral, justifies negligence towards its victims. The government asserts that the traumatic death of Aboriginal sex workers is the result of their corrupt act of prostitution. However, *Vigil* asks critical questions and offers alternative reflections on colonial ideologies. Belmore redirects viewers' attention to the roots of alcoholism, prostitution, and drug addiction

among Aboriginal communities and represents them as significant victims of poverty, marginalization, hopelessness, and affliction. As victims of sexual and emotional abuse, suffering various dehumanizing experiences, and finding themselves abandoned and alone in protecting their children in extreme poverty, some Aboriginal women have been forced to turn to prostitution and substance use simply to survive. In other words, prostitution is a reaction by Aboriginal women to poverty, exclusion, dehumanization, and marginalization; it is a work that enables women to support themselves and their children.

Belmore's *Vigil* recalls the missing and murdered women in an honourable way and questions the colonial politics of recording historical events by challenging the dominant state for its intentional attempts at erasing and forgetting the victims. Sophie McCall, in "Amplified Voices," states:

Rebecca Belmore engages with the history of European record-making of Aboriginal storytelling ... Rather than creating faithful 'transcriptions' of oral events, she is more inclined to deliberately destroy what might have been documents, leaving remnants which only suggest that a writing/telling exchange has taken place. She questions the power that documents have held in Canadian history in dispossessing Aboriginal peoples of land, language, and cultural practices. (111)

Belmore demonstrates that history is always a partial account of the past; sometimes, it is just a biased story based on the political discourse of the time. Rather than personal experience, *Vigil* is "sociological data" that "presents an opportunity to disrupt rather than confirm social order, ... it potentially disrupts the alignment of social class and social space" (Tate 22-3). Belmore's focus on missing and murdered Aboriginal women is connected to continuous colonial efforts in overseeing and marginalizing Aboriginal nations. Maggie Tate states:



[Belmore's performances] are sites of knowledge production. By knowledge, I mean an embodied or sensual knowledge that comes about not through representation, but is produced instead through an animated haunting. Animating a haunting through the situated use of her body, the artist who is haunted by disappeared women alerts her audience to a phenomenon of social inequality that cannot be represented because those who would be are no longer there. Haunted by unseen bodies, Belmore's performance brings into consciousness the social problem of spaces and people being treated by Canadian officials as degenerate, unworthy and outside of the public imaginary of Canada. (24)

With Tate's argument in mind, I argue that contemporary Canadian history is simply the reflection of the dominant power. Colonial history is the conversation between the official state legislation and the settler population about Aboriginal nations, lands, and cultures that leads them towards the marginalized Other who is "naked and speechless, barely present in [their] absence" (Haugo 128). However, the truth of history lies in the testimonies of ordinary peoples, minorities, and marginalized groups because from above and from the power position the details of oppressed groups' lives are invisible. Jeremy Bercher, in *History from Below*, asserts:

[H]istory was often regarded as solely a matter of what the powerful, the famous, and the wealthy thought and did. It was 'history from above.' What ordinary people felt and what they tried to accomplish was regarded as insignificant, not even worth regarding as part of history... [However,] ordinary people who are interested in the past of their families, communities, and organizations can contribute to the understanding of history. And it has

shown that history, appropriately presented, can find a wide audience when it addresses matters which concern ordinary people. (2)<sup>19</sup>

For a better understanding, I use Doris Sommer's argument about the distinction between "standing *in* for others" and "standing *up* among others" (Sommer 112). In "standing *in* for others[,]" through a dominant position, settlers become mediators between Aboriginal culture and a public audience. "Standing *up* among others[,]" on the other hand, underscores the subjectivity of Aboriginal voices. This process concentrates on Aboriginal self-perception in exploring their own history and culture.

Despite colonial efforts at silencing, denying, concealing, or forgetting the phenomenon of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, in *Vigil* Belmore restores Aboriginal oral hi/stories, memorializes and re-frames the memory of missing Aboriginal women, and interrogates the dominant state for the lack of care for these women. In contrast to representations of Aboriginal women in the Canadian mainstream media, Belmore's *Vigil* generates new critiques and discourses on socio-political, economic, and cultural prejudices and exclusions and raises awareness about the high level of colonial violence against Aboriginal women. Belmore's performative practice and the use of the embodiment method is a powerful medium to challenge colonial conversations on the tragic experience of Vancouver's missing and murdered women, and to counter racist and sexist stereotypes.

Objects and settings in Belmore's performances are two important features of her artworks. She often represents her works in meaningful public spaces using objects from Aboriginal history and culture. By "gathering materials from her natural environment and transposing and transfiguring them for a gallery setting[,]" Belmore's artworks underline the connection of Aboriginal people's life to the land (Laurence, "Racing against History" 46). As

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<sup>19</sup> See also "Walking in the City" by Michel de Certeau.

mentioned above, in *Fountain* and *Vigil* Belmore represents water as a precious and powerful resource in Aboriginal culture. In *Fountain*, the water, as the central element of power, provides a new life to the survivor. In *Vigil*, the water acts as a healer. In both, water has the power to remove Aboriginal traumas. The artist scrubs the sidewalk, washes her face and rinses her mouth with water as a natural source for cleansing historical impurities.

Belmore's *Trace* (2014) is also representative of the connection between human life and land in an Aboriginal worldview. Based on a plural process, *Trace* is a ceramic blanket installed at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg, MB. It is made from thousands of clay beads and each of the beads represents the trace of the palm of one of the participants' hands. The clay used for this piece was taken from the Red River Valley. For a long time, this area has been the traditional territory of several Aboriginal tribes, such as the Ojibwe and Métis. During the 1700s and 1800s trade took place in this region between Aboriginal peoples and the Hudson Bay Company. "[A]s a way of killing off the Aboriginal population," the settler company, intentionally, gave smallpox-infected blankets to Aboriginal peoples in exchange for fur and animal pelts (Belmore 20). The infected blankets killed "one-third to one-half of the indigenous population of the American continents" (Wesley-Esquimaux 14). *Trace* is a timeless piece that takes a long journey into the deep layers of history and reminds viewers of the colonial atrocities committed against First Nations peoples. As a sculpture of a blanket, *Trace* evokes Belmore's installation *a blanket for 'Sarah'* (1994); in which Belmore has created a blanket made from "thousands of pine needles collected from the forest floor, ... near Sioux Lookout" that alludes to "a homeless woman who froze to death on the cold street of Sioux Lookout" (Martin et al. 10). In these two works, Belmore, through a "biting metaphor[.]" represents the colonial state's "irresponsibility toward issues surrounding homeless people" (10). For Belmore, history and memory are derived from the intersections amongst body, place, and material.

Belmore uses the potential of space as a strategy in creating critical meanings and remonstrative positions. Belmore states:

Public space as a material is a good way of seeing my approach to making work, especially performance works. I take off my shoes, stand, and momentarily imagine how it must have been before Europeans made it theirs. My physical being becomes conceptually grounded, my female Indian-ness unquestionable. (Nanibush, “An Interview with Rebecca Belmore” 215)

Public places transform into active sites of socio-political and cultural resistances in Belmore’s practices. The space that an art piece represents is an important factor of recognition that affects viewers’ interpretations. In this regard, Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (the space of *Vigil*) can be considered as a social discourse that articulates the marginalization and invisibility of Aboriginal peoples. It is a symbolic space that not only echoes the sounds of missing or murdered women, but, by extension, represents alternative sites of colonial violence against Aboriginal communities and cultures.

Moreover, representing her works in public places provides the space for viewers to be an active part of the performances by directly engaging and participating in the process of creation. Rather than inviting them as mere viewers, Belmore invites audiences to act as witnesses who can testify to the racial history of colonialism. She points to the social responsibility of audiences and encourages them to be politically and socially active against colonialism “as it is lived through the neoliberal present[,]” and to support the survivors in the long journey of recognition and healing (Tate 30). Belmore’s practices become less about individual issues and more about the struggle between colonialism and the reconstruction of Aboriginal collective self-determination. Belmore’s public performances thus have the potential “to produce new social

relationships and thus new social realities” (Springgay 9) in the minds of the public in order to re-construct Canadian cultural and social memory.

Nanibush argues that the act of remembering and recalling honourable past hi/stories is a practice of art-making. Belmore draws a line between what Nanibush calls “history-making and performative storytelling” (“Love and Other Resistances” 172-3). Furthermore, creation and art-making, as Anderson claims, “can be a part of a process of self-determination that moves from the individual right out through the nations” (205). Anderson argues that more than creation, Aboriginal artworks are “life force[s]” contributing to Aboriginal resurgence by recognition and reclamation of traditional knowledge (200). Considering Nanibush’s and Anderson’s arguments, I argue that Aboriginal self-determination and resurgence is based on returning to and revitalizing the honourable past. Aboriginal sovereignty is made possible through the restoration of traditional oral hi/stories within contemporary lives. This idea corresponds with what Poka Laenui called “rediscovery and recovery” (Laenui 152) as the first step in the process of decolonization. Belmore’s use of the past and embodiment of Aboriginal lived experiences can be considered as transformative activism actualizing Aboriginal resurgence and re-creating Aboriginal sovereignty and subjectivity by representing “a radical alternative present based on deep reciprocity and the gorgeous generative refusal of colonial recognition” (Simpson 10). Her decolonial performances deal with Aboriginal identities at both the private and social levels and challenge colonial cultural and social violence against Aboriginal communities. Through a decolonial approach, Belmore employs the means of Aboriginal traditional storytelling for cultural survival and socio-cultural change.

Belmore’s body is “an imaginary site of [Aboriginal] presence” (Tuer, “Gestures in the Looking Glass” 54) that, after a period of imposed silence and absence, reveals new realities about colonial history. Her body movements, as “narratives of the subject[,]” provide active

space for destroying the “domino effect” of assimilation and cultural appropriation and recreate Aboriginal history from an Aboriginal perspective without colonial intervention (65).

Belmore’s projects, in my opinion, are powerful tools in exploring Aboriginal collective identity because as Stuart Hall declares, “[i]dentity is always in the process of formation, ... the process of identification ...[s]plitting between that which one is, and that which is the other” (47-8). Her self-representations imply cultural representation by “refut[ing] notions of a fixed identity or teleological order, [and] replacing it with a nomadic and creative body” which Springgay calls “nomadic subjectivity” and “political agency” (4). Belmore’s embodiment of memory through her performance brings about possible changes in public perceptions of Aboriginal culture and history to construct a new perspective of Canadian cultural memory. Her projects “reproduce or resist official versions of the past, including the reenactment of social roles and identities within the context of hegemony and the state” (Rimstead 2). Kiera Ladner, in “From Little Things,” valorizes “unofficial and non-state political spaces and political actors” in the process of Aboriginal resurgence by stating that:

They are the ones that are, and have always been, the source of political mobilization and change in communities and they are the source of strength and inspiration for the wider (the local and global) Indigenous rights movement. They are the Clan Mothers, the activists, the traditionalists, the word warriors, the speakers/revitalizers of the language, the dancers, the militants, the fishers, the grandmothers that write, sleep, eat and build their vision of hope and change. (314)

### Chapter Three:

#### *Tomorrow People*<sup>20</sup>: Nurturing the Present, Harvesting the Future

“[T]he work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization and identity politics... Sovereignty is the border that shifts Indigenous experience from victimized stance to a strategic one.”

Steven Loft, “Sovereignty, Subjectivity and Social Action” 65

“We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.”

N. Scott Momaday, “The Man Made of Words” 167

Aboriginal artists have used new media to produce art since the 1980s as a platform for cultural re-appropriation and knowledge transmission. They have used the potential of new media technologies “to connect, learn, and organize in both the digital and the physical worlds” (Leggatt 223). New technologies offer the opportunity for Aboriginal artists to create alternative socio-political and cultural frameworks within the dominant society. Cree/Métis theorist, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, in “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” states:

For some, this is the first time since contact and submergence within dominant, preexisting European cultural practices that their voices and images are being heard, seen, respected, and celebrated outside of their own communities... Networked art practice is

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<sup>20</sup> Skawennati’s solo exhibition held in Montreal in 2017.

becoming a crucial framework for the emerging recognition and empowerment of Indigenous cultures around the globe. (192)

Aboriginal new media artists use cyberspace for cultural persistence and self-determination after 500 years of misrepresentations and erasure. They attempt to create what Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito have called “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” (Fragnito and Lewis, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” 29).

In recent years, Mohawk curator and digital artist Skawennati has used digital technology to fight ongoing colonialism and to empower Aboriginal communities to revitalize Aboriginal storytelling by adapting stories using modern technologies in order to envision Aboriginal sovereignty in the future. Skawennati has used a broad range of digital media to produce her work, including websites, apps, virtual worlds, machinima, and video-games. For Skawennati, cyberspace is a medium that can restore Aboriginal knowledge within the present dominant society and empower Aboriginal communities in the future. Using innovative methods, she creates alternative images of Aboriginal peoples in the future and futurizes Aboriginal ancestral oral stories in cyberspace. Her new media productions can be considered as the modern version of elders’ stories envisioning a prosperous Aboriginal culture in the future. Skawennati invites Aboriginal peoples, especially youth, to visualize and create their own imaginative future using Aboriginal storytelling and new media. Rather than simply consuming media images produced by others, she encourages Aboriginal peoples to “reclaim Indigenous history and posit a future where Indigenous nations have self-determination” (Leggatt 217).

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Skawennati’s new media projects contribute to what Leanne Simpson calls a “Radical resurgen[ce]” by attempting “to imagine and create an elsewhere in the here; a present future beyond the imaginative and territorial bounds of colonialism” (Simpson 173). I will first examine how Aboriginal new media artists employ the



potential of digital technologies as both “creative expression and production” of cultural representation and preservation, as well as to empower Aboriginal communities to reclaim their sovereignty in the future imaginary (Fraguito and Lewis, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” 31). In the second part I focus on Skawennati’s digital reclamation of Aboriginal oral stories in her works *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century* and *Time Traveller<sup>TM</sup>*. I argue that Skawennati’s appropriation of the virtual world using Aboriginal traditional storytelling contributes to the removal of colonial stereotypes by using positive representation of Aboriginal peoples to visualize Aboriginal resurgence and future sovereignty.

### **Digital Storytelling**

As I have stated in previous chapters, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been misrepresented through stereotypical images imposed by the settler state. Various strategies of misrepresentation and erasure have provided the chance for Western society to justify and legitimize their theft of Aboriginal land, acts of cultural appropriation, and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples have suffered from the lack of access to Western cultural practices to illustrate their knowledge and cultures: “The written and printed word, photography, film, and television, have all been used by settler culture(s) to describe us while we were kept mute due to the lack of training, a lack of access to the technology, and a lack of access to the means of distribution” (Fraguito and Lewis, “Art Work as Argument” 206). The settler mass media has excluded Aboriginal communities from the dominant historical and cultural discourses and pushed them to marginal positions. Aboriginal peoples have had little chance to speak about their cultures and world views from their own perspectives, so that their knowledge and cultures have been distorted as they have been described through colonial stereotypes.

In recent decades, cultural appropriation and assimilation have taken new forms through digital technologies and the increasing number of audiences, consumers, and creators of virtual worlds. The colonial tendency to stereotype Aboriginal peoples has not disappeared, but, rather, has expanded with new media technologies that have allowed dominant voices to continue racist and discriminatory practices. When produced from a Western colonial perspective, Aboriginal stories are often consciously represented in distorted ways in cyberspace in order to erase Aboriginal peoples' presence and to silence their voices concerning past historical and narrative future imaginaries. New media technologies and cyberspace have become powerful means for the continuation and fulfillment of colonial goals. Aboriginal peoples and cultures are affected by biased representations in mainstream new media, and new media technology is an "instrumentalization" employed by the dominant culture "to co-opt indigenous (including First Nations) cultures, decimate [their] languages, and deny self-representation" (LaPensée and Lewis 191). Geographical and cultural isolation, lack of technological education, and deliberate ignorance by the dominant culture were all barriers for Aboriginal artists to engage with new technologies, sweep negative images, and affect the future.

Nevertheless, for some decades now Aboriginal artists have reacted against the misuse of digital resources and, by challenging the concept of the ethical use of digital technologies, they have attempted to transform cyberspace into a valuable tool capable of contributing to cultural representation and preservation as well as reconstructing Aboriginal self-determination and sovereignty after years of suppression and erasure. Stephen Loft argues that the publication of *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* in 2005 became the symbol of the legitimization of the Aboriginal new media art "as the outgrowth of a distinctly Aboriginal visual and literary culture" ("Aboriginal Media Art" 101).

Contemporary new media artists such as Archer Pechawis, Stephen Loft, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Jason Edward Lewis, and Skawennati have attempted to legitimize and institutionalize the emerging practice of digital art. Aboriginal artists and scholars, in recent years, have incorporated new technologies into the Aboriginal perspective to proclaim that “the colonial project has been ultimately unsuccessful in erasing Indigenous existence” and to centralize Aboriginal peoples and rebuild Aboriginal self-determination and subjectivity (Sium and Ritskes IV). Aboriginal new media art is now empowering Aboriginal nations and subverting a colonial history based on misrepresentations of Aboriginal cultures by reclaiming their traditional oral stories and worldviews. Aboriginal artists and scholars have used new media technologies as modern contemporary forms of storytelling to transmit, advance, and preserve Aboriginal oral traditions and knowledge. Their new media productions have become a powerful response to what Dana Claxton calls “ongoing conversations about inclusion and how Aboriginal art is to be situated in the academy and public spaces” (16) and have provided the space for Aboriginal peoples to speak in their own voices, give visibility to their cultures, and open up new possibilities for Aboriginal cultural and political sovereignty in the future through revitalizing and reclaiming Aboriginal hi/stories within a new visual platform. As an experimental new media artist, Dana Claxton, in “Re:wind,” underlines the role of Aboriginal new media art in making connections between cultural traditions and contemporary socio-cultural experiences, stating that: “Our creative expression sustains a connection to ancient ways, places our identities and concerns in the immediate, while linking us to the future... Such expression is an articulation of our culture and presents an Aboriginal perspective for all those who will listen” (40).

Cherokee writer and activist Thomas King, in *The Truth About Stories*, states “The truth about stories, is that that’s all we really are” (2). Aboriginal history, culture(s), languages, cosmology, and worldview can be found in Aboriginal oral stories. In the same vein, Aman Sium

and Eric Ritskes in their 2013 article “Speaking truth to power” state: “Stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing, and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form” (II). These arguments demonstrate that storytelling is a powerful tool that contributes to the anchoring of Aboriginal communities. Traditional storytelling validates Aboriginal cultural survival by proclaiming the continued existence of Aboriginal peoples and emphasizing their worldviews. Aboriginal hi/stories have been transmitted by storytellers from generation to generation either orally, through images on wampum belts, masks, house crests, dance, and more recently by writing, performance art, and theatre. Contemporary works connect Aboriginal history to the present and help to teach and nurture the future position of Aboriginal peoples on Turtle Island. However, due to ongoing forms of colonialism, Aboriginal hi/stories have been represented in distorted ways. “Replication in storytelling,” as Candice Hopkins argues, is a “positive and necessary” act through which Aboriginal traditions “are kept alive and remain relevant” (“Interventions in Digital Territories” 130). Aboriginal new media artists now consider cyberspace a positive medium that has the potential to resist colonial stereotypical representations and to re-establish Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determining cultural and collective identities. Jason Edward Lewis argues:

Now it is time to look forward, to continue that work by teaching ourselves not only how to use these technologies but also how to make these technologies. We have the opportunity and the obligation to involve ourselves intimately in the shaping of the structures and systems in which we will be living for the next five hundred years. (“A Better Dance and Better Prayers” 72)

If Aboriginal peoples accept misrepresentations imposed by colonial states and believe themselves to be “vanished” nations they will not exist in the future. Lewis, in “A Better Dance and Better Prayers,” emphasizes the necessity of envisioning an Aboriginal presence in the future

and asserts: “Our absence from the future imaginaries of the settler culture should worry us. Absence implies non-existence, or, at the very least, non-importance. A people that are absent in the future need not be consulted in the present about how that future comes about” (58). After warning of their absence in the future imaginary, Lewis encourages Aboriginal communities to use new media technologies to change “the popular consciousness” (64) and rebuild their subjectivity in the future. He motivates Aboriginal youth and artists to use the potential of new media to transform colonial misrepresentations into Aboriginal self-determination and create their own Aboriginal territories in cyberspace by replacing Western perspectives with Aboriginal worldviews.

Skawennati uses digital technology to visualize an Aboriginal future in cyberspace and ask a number of questions: What kind of people will they be? What kind of society can they build in the future? How strong will their communities be? Skawennati’s works unsettle colonial assumptions of the “vanishing Indian” and offer the hope for a sovereign and prosperous future for Aboriginal nations. Her various productions, including *Looking forward* (2014), *Now?Now* (2017), and *Tomorrow People* (2018), as well as her virtual projects such as *CyberPowWow* (1997-2004), *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century* (2001), and *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (2008) counter colonial ignorance and erasure by creating Aboriginal worlds in cyberspace and re-representing Aboriginal oral hi/stories. In 2006 Jason E. Lewis and Skawennati designed a research website called *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (AbTeC) within the virtual space of *Second Life*<sup>21</sup> to reinstate the place and presence of Aboriginal communities in the virtual world. With the aim of re-imagining and critiquing distorted hi/stories, the artists expand Aboriginal cultures and knowledge by indigenizing “understandings of the

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<sup>21</sup> Created in 2003, *Second Life* is a free online 3D platform that is used as a virtual world.

supposedly ‘new world’ of cyberspace”<sup>22</sup> (Leggatt 217) and re-telling Aboriginal traditional stories in the virtual world. Lewis and Skawennati assert that their intention for AbTeC is “to tell our stories and in developing methods for encouraging greater participation by our people in the production of such work... to have an impact on ongoing conversations about aboriginal cultural policy, educational approaches, and research methodologies... to present a self-determined image to the world” (“Art Work as Argument” 205-6). More than a simple space of resistance, AbTeC contributes to collective Aboriginal empowerment, resurgence, and sovereignty. Lewis and Skawennati have developed their critical frameworks by indigenizing the virtual world and defining their positions vis-a-vis Western new media art. Skawennati and Lewis argue that their work re-frames new media technologies:

By working creatively within popular media genres such as videogames, by making that work freely available on the Internet, by imagining Aboriginal people in the far-future, and by actively engaging in the conversations influencing the evolution of the technology, we can mount arguments within the discourse we want to change as opposed to simply conducting arguments about it. (“Art Work as Argument” 212)

Similarly, Vizenor, in “Aesthetics of Survivance,” underlines the importance of new expressions of Aboriginal practices that highlight both Aboriginal presence and cultural values in stating that “The practices of survivance create an active presence, more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence... Survivance is character by natural reason, not by monotheistic creation stories and dominance of nature. Survivance stories create a sense of presence and situational sentiments of chance” (11). Expanding on Vizenor’s concept of survivance, I argue that, through

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<sup>22</sup> The use of the word “supposedly” in Leggatt’s citation can be considered as the confirmation of Steven Loft’s idea that new media technologies are rooted in Aboriginal cultures. Loft in “Mediacosmology,” argues that new media technologies are modern versions of Aboriginal traditional Wampum and wampum belts (172).

new contexts of machinima<sup>23</sup> and video games, AbTeC embodies an Aboriginal future imaginary and re-conceptualizes Aboriginal identity, resurgence, and sovereignty. Rather than being mere consumers of pre-existing technologies that contribute to “colonial permanence” (Simpson 153), AbTeC encourages and educates Aboriginal peoples, especially Aboriginal youth, to “be the storytellers, not just have stories told about [them]” (Fragnito and Lewis, “Art Work as Argument” 207). Skawennati and Lewis design workshops called Skins in AbTeC in order to help Aboriginal teens to adapt traditional stories into video games and create their own territories in cyberspace. Aboriginal youth are able to learn to determine their Aboriginal identity and become active agents in the reclamation of Aboriginal resurgence and sovereignty. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew underlines the pivotal role of Aboriginal youth in the development of Aboriginal future sovereignty in stating that:

[A]rts education for youth and their participation in, and awareness of the arts are significant contributors to the development of innovation, leadership, community engagement, critical thinking, self-discipline, self-motivated learning, teamwork, and self-esteem. These skills are essential for the perceptive vision, adaptability, and intricate cultural negotiation that the rapidly rising demographic of Indigenous youth will require as future leaders of their communities –honouring the teachings of their Elders and celebrating their cultures in the world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and conflict.

(193)

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<sup>23</sup> Machinima is a compound word consisting of machine + cinema. This recent expression points to techniques of producing digital movies within the virtual environment of *Second Life* based on 3D video games frameworks. In Trace Harwood’s terms “[m]achinima is a digital creative practice that seeks to combine games, art/film/media, communications and computing/technologies, span boundaries among different disciplines and draw upon social and technical competences in order to achieve something that is greater than the sum of the parts” (173).

Skawennati argues that Aboriginal video games are “another form of storytelling” (qtd. in Roetman 47) that provides space for Aboriginal youth to learn, interpret, and reframe traditional hi/stories in creative ways.

Skawennati uses new media technologies “to answer questions about how [Aboriginal] stories are told and how these can be remediated via new media” (Fragnito and Lewis, “Art Work as Argument” 208). I argue that Skawennati’s counter-histories resist colonialism by restoring traditional knowledge and adapting it to present-day issues. Telling and re-telling Aboriginal oral stories is a form of resistance against dominant media narratives as it contributes to the subversion of stereotypical images and re-identification with positive images that can lead towards self-determination and sovereignty. As Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes argue:

Indigenous stories are a reclamation of Indigenous voice, Indigenous land, and Indigenous sovereignty. They are vital to decolonization. Traditional storytelling works to both deconstruct colonial ways of coming to know, as well as construct alternatives - recognizing that these two processes do not happen in a linear trajectory; if we are waiting for the dismantling of colonial structures before we focus on rebuilding Indigenous and decolonial alternatives, we will always be too late... for Indigenous peoples, stories are open-ended processes for speaking reclamation and resurgence, dialogue and contestation, they are part of a cycle of renewal and recreation. Finally, storytelling is an act of ceremony that seeks to undo and re- imagine. (VIII)

New media technologies make space for Aboriginal artists to represent their traditional stories in new frameworks and to take “control over how we represent ourselves to each other and to non-Aboriginals” (Fragnito and Lewis, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” 29). In her article “Bodies, Sovereignities, and Desire,” Sarah Henzi underlines the significant role of Aboriginal women’s storytelling in the cultural re-appropriation and re-humanization of Aboriginal



communities in both literary and performative communities and states: “[T]he last fifteen years have seen an artistic and literary surge, and Aboriginal women have been at the forefront, maintaining storytelling traditions while providing the necessary ‘update’ to engage in dialogue with the contemporary world” (87). Skawennati’s new media productions, in the same way, challenge the lack of images of Aboriginal peoples in cyberspace and their ability to affect the future.

In 1996, Skawennati designed her first digital project, called *CyberPowWow*, a mixed research website and virtual chatroom in Palace<sup>24</sup> space that continued until 2004. *CyberPowWow* provided “a free and open space” (Skawennati and Lewis, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” 30) through which Aboriginal artists, no matter their geographical distances, could gather, communicate with each other, discuss their art, and share their stories. It was a creative strategy moving beyond the restrictions of Western-colonial systems and helping in the demarginalization of Aboriginal identity. With the aim of reclaiming Aboriginal knowledge, *CyberPowWow*, in Candice Hopkins’ words, is “a place within which participants can take on new identities, view artworks, read critical writings, meet and speak with people from around the world... *CyberPowWow* is not an experience of shedding identity, but an exercise in reaffirming it” (“Interventions in Digital Territories” 135-6). David Gaertner argues that *CyberPowWow* contributes to new cultural representations and resurgence, as it is “a singular indigenous space for installation art, performance, and community-building” (57). The goal of creating this project, as Skawennati states, was “to use the Web to connect a community of artists spread across the continent... to create work about place, real or imagined, where Natives meet non-Natives” (“Five Suggestions for Better Living” 235). *CyberPowWow* provides the space for Aboriginal nations to survive and heal within Western society by reframing traditional hi/stories. The use of digital

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<sup>24</sup> The Palace software was the first online graphical chatroom, originally created in the 1990s in London, England.

technology offers the space to “frame more imaginative, pleasurable, flexible, and often humorous renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms, such as the presentation of the spiritual and dream world, than are often possible in official political contexts” (Raheja 29).

Digital spaces were not always considered positive for Aboriginal artists. Early debates about their potential addressed the difficulty of critiquing colonialism using colonial methods and practices. Critics argued that there was a paradox between Western technologies and Aboriginal traditional worldviews. That is, Aboriginal cosmology and new technologies, as the legacy of colonization, might not fit into the same framework. Cree/Métis activist and writer Loretta Todd was one of the most critical voices in the debate. She challenged the validity of new technologies to translate and transmit Aboriginal knowledge and ideology by asking: “Can our narratives, histories, languages and knowledge find meaning in cyberspace?” (Todd 153). Further, Todd questioned, “How do these concepts fit into cyberspace when cyberspace has been created within societies that view creation and the universe so differently - one that creates hierarchies of being that reinforce separation and alienation with one that seeks harmony and balance with the self and the universe?” (157). In “Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace” Todd calls computer-based technologies “re-enactments of western cultural consciousness” (162) and “a clever guise for neo-colonialism, where tyranny will find further domain” (154). Todd underlines the differences between Aboriginal worldviews and Western culture and argues that it is impossible to represent Aboriginal knowledge and storytelling, as material realities of the physical world in the virtual world. Todd asserts that “Cyberspace is a place to escape the earthly plane and the mess of humanity... a place of loss or death, where we are to be reborn inside the machine” (Todd 156), while Aboriginal life and knowledge are closely connected to the land and nature—“They learned both *from* the land and *with* the land” (Simpson 150).

Todd's "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace" was originally published in 1996 when Aboriginal artists had just begun to employ new media for cultural representation.<sup>25</sup> Today, Todd plays a significant role in Aboriginal media art criticism and practice. She has produced a wide range of documentary videos and movies, such as *Kainayssini Imanistaisiwa: The People Go On* (2003) and *Monkey Beach* (2019), exploring the concept and importance of Aboriginal knowledge, lands, and storytelling. Almost twenty-five years after Todd's critical questioning of new technology, she now sees new media art as "the practical application of electronic and digital production media and interrelationships created by its use" (Loft, "Aboriginal New Media art" 94) as a powerful tool for resistance, and considers its use as a creative medium for the empowerment of Aboriginal communities by offering new forms of cultural production and Aboriginal resurgence as there are close connection between "virtual communities and First Nations communities in the 'real' world" (LaPensée and Lewis 193). In "Material Connections in Skawennati's Digital worlds" Judith Leggatt highlights the connections between the material and digital worlds and states: "[T]he cyber world and material world supported each other and allowed for the formation of communities across physical distance" (218). Leggatt continues: "The virtual world is not a separate matrix, but rather an extension of the physical world" (230). Dot Tuer, in *Mining the Media Archive: Essays on Art, Technology, and Cultural Resistance*, also underlines the impossibility of dividing the virtual and the real world, stating that: "Rather than dispensing with the material world, cyberspace masks and mimics social relations within a realm of simulation" (6). Tuer's argument suggests that indigenizing the virtual environment is a remarkable achievement that can lead towards reconstructing Aboriginal sovereignty in the material world.

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<sup>25</sup> In 1993, Paula Giese was among the first Aboriginal artists to create websites for "Native audiences" in which she wrote about Aboriginal traditional stories and cosmologies (Hopkins, "Interventions in Digital Territories" 135).

Cree new media artist, filmmaker, and writer Archer Pechawis considers technology as “an admonition to First Nations to retain our traditional world view in the face of technological adaptation” (38). Hopkins, in “Interventions in Digital Territories,” also argues that Aboriginal new media art is a powerful platform to transfer Aboriginal knowledge. Hopkins states: “Cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated, and reinvented by Native people in ways similar to how we’ve always approached real space. Like video, digital technologies have become a medium for speaking and telling our stories” (135). Jackson 2Bears equally argues that Aboriginal knowledge produced from new media technologies takes a different approach to that of Western knowledge. Aboriginal new media technology “is a theory not purely based on ‘scientific/rational’ (Western) thinking, but one, as Cajete might say, that sees through objective reality to the spiritual essence of technology, and therein discovers what I would call the dark side of technicity: the spectral, phantomological, and haunto logical traces of ghosts in our machines” (2Bears 19). Moving away from Western-colonial concepts, Aboriginal new media art is an independent genre based on Aboriginal ideology that leads towards cultural self-determination. This is what Loft calls Aboriginal “new media landscape” or “Media cosmology” (“Decolonizing the ‘Web’” xvi). That is, Aboriginal new media productions, as realms of resurgence and self-determination, represent Aboriginal “epistemologies, histories, traditions, communication systems, art, and culture” (xv).

In this regard, the main function of new media technologies is, as Loft argues, connecting “the past to the present and the spiritual to the material[,]” which is not a new practice in Aboriginal culture (“Mediacosmology” 175). Loft challenges the contemporary Western concept of “new” media technologies and argues that technology “has always existed for Aboriginal people as the repository of our collected and shared memory” before its recent realization in Western societies (175). Loft makes a connection between new technologies and Aboriginal

traditional Wampum and states: “Wampum serves as a mnemonic sign technology that has been used to record hundreds of years of alliances within tribes, between tribes, and between the tribal governments and colonial government, as well as important social contracts between individuals, communities, and societies” (172). As a medium of sharing hi/stories, rituals, and traditions between Aboriginal communities, Wampum and wampum belts “constitute a ‘living’ material connection to the stories, treaties, alliances, and social interactions that define (in this case, Iroquois) media cosmologies” and contribute to both representation and preservation of Aboriginal knowledge and cultures (173).<sup>26</sup>

Abenaki artist and activist Alanis Obomsawin argues: “history tells the story and educates” (qtd. in Loft, “Sovereignty, Subjectivity, and Social Action” 64). Thomas King, in *The Truth About Stories*, states: “each time someone tells the story, it changes” (1). These statements suggest that history is dynamic and unconventional and does not represent a fixed reality. It varies with different narrators and perspectives. History strongly depends on who recounts past events and for what purpose. With this in mind, I argue that Skawennati is a storyteller of hi/story who employs new media to challenge and change the pre-existing perceptions and/or create new meanings. Her digital productions act as carriers and creators of history. She uses the dynamism of new technologies to vocalize the presence of Aboriginal peoples and hi/stories and metaphorize a dynamic and animated future for Aboriginal communities. In *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> (2008-2013) Skawennati looks both backwards and forwards to simultaneously celebrate Aboriginal hi/story and a powerful future imaginary.

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<sup>26</sup> This idea is also discussed in Archer Pechawis’ and Jackson 2Bears’ articles. In “Indigenism: Aboriginal World View as Global Protocol,” Pechawis states: “Our technological journey began nearly half a million years ago” (44); and in “My Post-Indian Technological Autobiography,” 2Bears points out to Aboriginal ritual masks, as visual medium guiding towards the past and spirit world, and calls them “living entities, animate artifacts, and sacred technologies” (17).

*Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> begins by introducing a young Mohawk named Hunter who lives in Montreal in 2121, and who is on a quest to find out the reality of the hi/story of his people from a Mohawk perspective, in contrast to European historical records. The *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> app and glasses allows him to travel through time and learn about his Mohawk heritage by experiencing the actual events occurring in both the past and future. Throughout the nine episodes<sup>27</sup>, Hunter moves from having a weak self-identity towards self-definition, from hate towards love of himself and others. Along the way, Hunter meets Karahkwenhawi, a female Mohawk avatar<sup>28</sup>, who lives in the present time (2011). She also uses the *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> glasses (episode 4) to travel through time and spaces with Hunter and together, they discover their Mohawk heritage and culture. “[O]rganized around principles of cyclical renewal rather than linear unfolding,” (Berlo and Phillips 4) the virtual protagonists travel back and forth between the past, present, and future. Relying on an Aboriginal holistic worldview, Skawennati interconnects an Aboriginal self-determined past to their powerful and sovereign future. *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> offers hope that Aboriginal sovereignty in the future is an achievable goal if Aboriginal nations regain their self-representation and reconstruct their self-determination.

Skawennati re-represents crucial moments in Aboriginal history, but she also deals with the reinforcement of Aboriginal collective power and envisions a vital and vibrant future for Aboriginal communities. Skawennati reframes Eurocentric interpretations from history and invites viewers to look at the past “not passively but actively” (Pullen 241) in order to re-think biased colonial narratives. Skawennati’s digital storytelling in *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> tries to remove stereotypical images from Aboriginal cultures and awaken public consciousness (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) that Aboriginal peoples have not vanished as they struggle to re-construct their

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<sup>27</sup> All the nine episodes are available through <https://www.timetravellertm.com/episodes/>

<sup>28</sup> Avatar refers to, in Dot Tuer words, “a digitally generated incarnation of oneself in cyberspace” (*Mining the Media Archive* 6).

identity. *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> rejects Eurocentric representations of Aboriginal culture and history that limit Aboriginal access to socio-political power and offers the hope for Aboriginal nations to take ownership and control over their lands, cultures, and communities. Skawennati's new media project emphasizes the recognition of Aboriginal cultures through Aboriginal voices and perspectives. This understanding of sovereignty turns Skawennati's *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> into critical decolonial media and contributes to nurturing strong communities in the future through the "rebuilding of Indigenous nations according to our own political, intellectual, and cultural traditions" (Simpson 158). Her new media productions, as LaPensée and Lewis argue, "seek to occupy, transform, appropriate and reimagine cyberspace" (105). In contrast to stereotypical images created by mainstream media, Skawennati's new media productions prove that, as Greg Young-Ing argues, Aboriginal cultures "do not remain encapsulated in the past, static and resistant to development" ("The Indigenous/New Technology Interface" 179). They also "create opportunities that can benefit our communities by preserving our cultures, increasing the use of our languages, and promoting a self-determined image to a worldwide audience" (LaPensée and Lewis 191). Skawennati's digital projects explore the favorable effects of the virtual world on the future of Aboriginal communities.

New media technologies, thus, represent a dual face. In their Western use, new technologies deny Aboriginal presence and distort Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal new media productions, on the other hand, can contribute to Aboriginal resurgence and sovereignty. Loft points to this transformative and transformational role of digital technologies by connecting digital technologies with Aboriginal Trickster figures. In "Aboriginal Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum," Loft states: "[T]echnology exists as shape shifter (not unlike the Trickster himself) neither inherently benign nor malevolent, but always acting and active, changing, transformative, giving effect to and affecting the world" (94). Loft underlines the

ability of new media to transform public perceptions and defy “colonialist modes of representation” (94). Skawennati’s cyber-based activism turns digital technologies into a valuable tool for Aboriginal cultural production. Her counter-narrative productions, as “a truly networked way of being” (Pechawis 42), create a bridge between new media technologies and Aboriginal storytelling as “a vessel of resurgence” (Simpson 158). Skawennati indigenizes the virtual world and brings a social and cultural change to contemporary real-world issues. She intervenes in colonial politics of representation and reframes the political concept of sovereignty that “carries the stench of colonialism” (Raheja 26) to reconstruct Aboriginal self-governance.

### **Mapping Out a New World**

While both Abel’s and Belmore’s artworks focus more on traumatic experiences endured by Aboriginal peoples, Skawennati’s digital projects envision a new and hopeful world in the future for Aboriginal communities. The main aim of Skawennati’s digital projects, as she states, “is the future; it is really to develop the future imaginary from an Indigenous perspective and it does not matter where it comes from” (“Skawennati @ IMRC Visiting Artist Series”) because “if you are an Indian and an artist, you are automatically an Indian artist” (Fraguito, “Five Suggestions For Better Living” 232). Marjorie Beaucage states:

The first step in the process of transforming our vision is recognizing the dominant ways of ordering Reality and Relationship and breaking away from the fatalistic view of the world in which systems are given and fixed. It is not enough to refuse, to protest against what is. We must also be willing to change, to woo new combinations, to present a new option whose power of attraction is so strong that it creates desire and image-in-nation. To develop new forms for what we see, what we embody. (141)



In the same regard, Jason Edward Lewis, in “A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future,” offers a typology for an Aboriginal future imaginary. According to Lewis, there are five steps in creating a different future for Aboriginal nations, including “Manifesting the Future[,]” “Hybridizing the Present[,]” “Altering the Past[,]” “Shaping the Infrastructure[,]” and “Critiquing the Project” (37-41). The first and the most important step in this typology is imagining a powerful future and proposing “vast new possibilities for thinking about how Native communities might evolve” (38) that lead towards “modifying contemporary realities to open up future possibilities” (39). Lewis argues that engaging with digital media culture and creating innovative technological projects offers a productive platform to reclaim the past and “better suit the needs of our communities” (40). Skawennati’s new media artworks are performative gestures examining the past hi/stories as major motivations for contemporary resistance and “populating the future imaginary” (Lewis, “A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future” 43).

In *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century*, created in 2000, Skawennati depicts Aboriginal peoples as survivors of colonialism and brings considerable attention to the future. The project is a web-based time-travel journal navigated by a female Indian paper doll called Katsitsahawi Capozzo who journeys through a millennium in Aboriginal history in order to re-frame past histories and trace the future for Aboriginal communities, in contrast to the image of “the vanishing Indians” propagated by colonial settler ideology. The avatar begins her journey in 2000 and invites viewers to travel with her to the past; to the year 1490, two years before first contact, and to five hundred years in the future, in 2488 at the Edmonton Olympics. *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century* moves from historical events towards imaginative visions.

In the first journal, Skawennati compares Tenochtitlan, “probably the largest city in the world in 1490 [,]” to Paris and London, the great European metropolises. She highlights issues in Aboriginal history before the arrival of colonizers, including enjoying “temples galore[,]”

“hanging gardens[,]” “a system of canals[,]” or the prohibition of alcohol “to anyone under the age of seventy” (*Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century*, “1490: Tenochtitlan”). She challenges colonial violence against Aboriginal peoples by discussing Aboriginal women as “willing and apt pupil[s]” (“1615: Pocahontas”), the eradication of Aboriginal cultures by enforcing European naming conventions, and Aboriginal massacres such as smallpox infected blankets (“1680: Kateri Tekakwitha”). Skawennati represents these historical events from an Aboriginal perspective. Rather than being a “traitor” who denies her Indigenous identity, she considers Pocahontas<sup>29</sup> to be an ambitious woman who wanted to experience “a big adventure”: “[f]or Pocahontas, going to England was probably a big adventure, I mean really big, like going to the moon!” (“1615: Pocahontas”). Rather than a “role model,” Skawennati represents Kateri Tekakwitha<sup>30</sup> as the victim of religious ideologies and colonialism’s ruthless drive to “civilize” through assimilation. Tekakwitha, in Skawennati’s story, was “just another feather in the cap of [colonizers] who tried to destroy [Aboriginals]” (“1680: Kateri Tekakwitha”).

Skawennati depicts the twenty-first century as a transition phase in Aboriginal history. In this “pivotal point[,]” Aboriginal peoples unite and take their position in the process of decolonization and contribute to sweeping away the traces of colonialism in order to start “a new

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<sup>29</sup> Pocahontas was the daughter of Wahunsenaca the Chief of Powhatan people. Her real name was Matoaka and Pocahontas was her nickname. During the winter of 1607, when Pocahontas was around 10-years-old, settlers arrived at Tsenacommacah, Pocahontas’ homeland. The English were welcomed by the Powhatan and they became friends and traded with each other. Pocahontas, as the representative of the Powhatan, became the symbol of peace to the English. However, over time, relations between the English and the Powhatan deteriorated and Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English and was taken to England. In order to survive her people, Pocahontas cooperated with the English. She converted to Christianity and her name was changed to Rebecca. She was married to John Rolfe and gave birth to a son Thomas. Pocahontas died at the age of 20 because of an unknown illness. See *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* by Linwood Custalow and Angela L. Daniel.

<sup>30</sup> Kateri Tekakwitha was a Mohawk woman who became “the Catholic Church’s first Native American saint” (Holmes 87). She was born in 1656 in an Iroquois village on the south bank of the Mohawk River. When she was four years old, she lost her parents and brother to a smallpox epidemic. At the age of 18, after encountering Jesuit missionaries, she turned towards Christianity and, two years later in 1676, “she was baptised and given the name Katherine, which was later translated as Kateri” (89). After suffering severe religious instructions, she died at the age of 24. “Kateri has been translated and transported, largely through narrative, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>, from obedient convert, silent, trapped in colonial categories, to powerful intercessor with a clear message to her people of unity, indigenous identity, ownership and belonging” (100).

millennium” (“2000: Katsitsahawi”). Skawennati encourages Aboriginal nations to “dream big” (“1969: Alcatraz”) by representing successful Aboriginal communities in the future in all domains, including technology, art, and sport. *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century* underlines the power of Aboriginal communities in the creation of a new technology “which allowed them to leave Earth and find another planet where they could live in peace” (“2374: Interplanetary Pow wow”). Without being bothered by settler civilization, they re-tell their ancestors’ stories and add their hyphenated maternal and paternal grandparents’ names to their birth certificates. In sport, “almost 90% of the Olympic athletes from Turtle Island are of Aboriginal descent” and the medalists are “a flood of First Nations” (“2490: Edmonton Olympics”). In Skawennati’s vision, drumming and traditional dancing are now part of the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics and Aboriginal traditional sports make up a large part of the Olympics games. The remarkable point in the Aboriginal future imaginary depicted by Skawennati is that “men and women compete together” (“2490: Edmonton Olympics”), illustrating how the “gender injustice” (Anderson 109) of colonial history will be eradicated completely<sup>31</sup>.

Through a textual framework, *Imagining Indians in the 25<sup>th</sup> century* recounts Aboriginal people’s self-determined collective identity and their sovereign cultures in the future. The self-created image of Aboriginal communities in the future is further reinforced in Skawennati’s 3-D project *Time Traveller<sup>TM</sup>*. The use of *Second Life* to create her machinima offers Skawennati a chance to animate avatars in a virtual environment. *Second Life* provides the opportunity for visualizing Aboriginal oral tradition and “propagate [Aboriginal] message[s] across a world-spanning network” (Fragnito and Lewis, “Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace” 30). As Winter and Boudreau argue, “[d]igital technologies, therefore hold incredible potential as tools to

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<sup>31</sup> For the journals and related images see: <http://www.skawennati.com/ImaginingIndians/timeline.htm>

revitalize Indigenous stories in which are embedded Indigenous worldviews and ways of knowing that have strengthened communities since time immemorial” (40).

“[T]hrough the insertion of Indigenous figures into cyberspace and the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and culture in a virtual setting” as well as “the retelling and reimagining of Indigenous histories in *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup>” (Pullan 239-40), Skawennati indigenizes the virtual world and contributes to Aboriginal resurgence and self-determination. Over nine episodes, Skawennati re-represents important events in Aboriginal history, such as the story of Kateri Tekakwitha’s sainthood in 1680, the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, and the Oka Resistance in 1990. Through a positive Aboriginal perspective, all these traumatic historical events are represented as the basis of the present resistance that paves the way for sovereignty and decolonization for the coming generations.

In the second episode of *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup>, Skawennati highlights mainstream manipulations of Aboriginal hi/stories when Aboriginal peoples had no venue to speak and share their own stories. In this episode, Hunter puts on his Time Traveller<sup>TM</sup> glasses and goes back to 1862 in Dakota. The episode represents a group of starving Dakota people peacefully ask a European farmer to give them some food. The settler reacts violently and responds to their polite request by aiming a gun at them. Conversely, what comes out from colonial media accounts about this event is that a group of “savage” Dakota hunters violently killed all the members of a settler family. Skawennati’s work reimagines this scene from an Aboriginal perspective and alters both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewer’s understanding of the story. The contrast between Aboriginal and settler perspectives of the same story reveals “how perspective influences beliefs” (Leggatt 224). Skawennati’s work shows that “the truth of history was deliberately obscured by the settlers” (Leggatt 224).

In episode three, Skawennati creates an alternative perspective on the Oka Resistance. In this episode of *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup>, Hunter goes back to the first of September 1990 in Kanehsatake during the “Oka Crisis.” The episode starts up with the symbolic image of the Oka barricade, showing the moment of the face-to-face encounter between a young Canadian soldier and the Mohawk warrior captured by Shaney Komulainen. Beginning on July 11, the so-called Oka Crisis was a peaceful protest by the Mohawk nation against the plans of the municipality of Oka based on the expansion of a golf course in Kanehsatake, the Mohawk reserve situated on the west of Montreal, which eventually turned violent. The crisis ended on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 1990, after 78 days of resistance. Aboriginal warriors unexpectedly laid down their arms, burnt their weapons, and removed the barricade.

The Oka Resistance is a critical scene in Skawennati’s work, as it re-humanizes the Mohawk warriors as pacifist activists protecting their sacred lands against colonial intrusion. The avatar Lance Thomas, in this episode, emphasizes “peace, power, righteousness” as the three essential principles in “protecting our territory” (episode 3). Citing Mohawk artist and activist, Louis Karoniaktajeh Hall, Lance Thomas invites warriors to “think right,” “do right,” and “be right” in order to “achieve peace and happiness for all” (episode 3). However, rather than protectors, Aboriginal warriors were represented in the mass media as aggressive, violent, and “savage” protestors. Skawennati’s *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> situates the event in a new framework and illustrates it as a symbol of Aboriginal collective alliance in protecting their traditional territories.

Some Aboriginal artists and scholars have independently attempted to subvert stereotypical representations made by dominant media through art or writing. In 1993, three years after the barricade of Oka, Alanis Obomsawin produced her documentary *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, which informed audiences about the realities of the Oka Resistance. Taking a counter-narrative perspective, Obomsawin’s work reveals how colonial oppression, racism, and

violence existed during the time of the event, but was deliberately hidden by mainstream media. Her work addresses the political, social, economic, and cultural oppression that Aboriginal peoples endured during 270 years of colonialism and emphasizes the importance of the Oka Resistance in disclosing colonial violence and injustice against Aboriginal peoples and re-humanizing Aboriginal culture and identity. Aboriginal nations, after years of being silenced, have started to vocalize their rights to sovereignty stolen by colonial governments. In Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* the Oka Resistance is depicted as a victory, not a "surrender," as it brought together many Aboriginal communities in support of the Mohawks. Marie David, one of the warriors present during the Oka Resistance, states: "If the people from TC<sup>32</sup> came out, they were not surrendering, they did not have their hands held above their heads. They were going home" (*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*). Paula Sherman, in her interview with Leanne Simpson, emphasizes that the Oka barricade was a "wake-up call" that "reminded people that [Aboriginal peoples] can stand up and resist bad policies and protect the land" (232). Skawennati, for her part, re-imagines the Oka Resistance as a victory for both the Mohawk nation and all Aboriginal peoples in Canada, as it was the manifestation of Aboriginal solidarity leading towards future self-determination. In Skawennati's work, the blockade becomes "a symbol that we must stand strong as one, ... we must choose to say no, no more. No more can you divide and conquer; no more will you instill fear in us. No more" (Laboucan-Massimo 217). The Oka Resistance through Skawennati's Aboriginal perspective shifts from "surrender," to "going home," and finally victory (episode 3). The Oka Resistance is depicted as a turning point representing new faces of Aboriginal self-awareness and self-determination.

In episode four, Skawennati draws viewers' attention towards the future and depicts a new landscape for Aboriginal peoples. This episode begins in 2011, when the two main avatars

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<sup>32</sup> The treatment center in Kanesatake where Mohawk warriors took refuge.

encounter each other. Karahkwenhawi, the female protagonist, enters the Kahnawake Catholic Church to collect data on Kateri Tekakwitha for her research paper, “The Representation of Aboriginal People in Public Spaces.” Hunter appears suddenly and leaves his Time Traveller<sup>TM</sup> glasses behind. After his disappearance, Karahkwenhawi puts the glasses on and travels through time and space. She goes to the 2112 Winnipeg Olympics, where an Aboriginal powwow is being held. With a focus on the powwow and Aboriginal collectivity, Skawennati emphasizes the importance of alliance and collective power between Aboriginal nations. The inability of colonial efforts to assimilate and appropriate Aboriginal peoples and cultures is foregrounded in this episode. In contrast to the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples from important socio-political issues by colonial states, Skawennati depicts the sovereignty and power of Aboriginal peoples. The gathering of Aboriginal peoples includes traditional drumming, jingle dancing in traditional costumes, Aboriginal music from a band ironically named the “Dead Mohawks,” and an Aboriginal Fashion Show “featuring the next season’s regalia collection” (episode 4). This episode situates Aboriginal communities as dynamic and sovereign future nations. The powwow’s host, Luke Mithoowastee, contributes to re-humanizing Aboriginal nations by speaking of them as civilized nations with colorful clothes or calling them “beautiful Aboriginal people” (episode 4). Skawennati attempts to “gather strength, collectivize, and proliferate cultural resurgence” (Gaerthner 58), by centralizing a powwow both on social and cultural levels. Skawennati’s *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> traces Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination as a realizable and accomplishable goal in the real world, rather than simply in a virtual space.

The resurgence of Aboriginal communities in the future is further emphasized in episode nine. This episode represents the “incredible advancements” of Aboriginal nations in 2121. Aboriginal resistance movements lead to Aboriginal communities becoming “stronger than ever” (episode 9). The different tribes, including Cree, Anishinaabe, and Blackfoot, finally re-gain their

ability to self-govern. They become independent governments with self-chosen flags. The presence of the shrine of Kateri Tekakwitha in an Aboriginal location, rather than in church, represents Aboriginal peoples having become the owners of their hi/stories as storytellers.

The end of the final episode finishes with a party in Hunter's apartment, which represents a modern version of the powwow tradition. Ending *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> with a powwow ceremony reveals Skawennati's special attention towards the gathering of Aboriginal peoples and the strengthening of collective power. Powwow ceremonies, in my opinion, are enactments of Aboriginal resurgence and sovereignty, as they restore Aboriginal traditions, including stories, dance, and music. Powwow ceremonies provide spaces for recognition and exchange of Aboriginal knowledge. William K. Powers, in *War Dance: Plains Indian Musical Performance*, states that "Intertribal music and dance reinforce American Indian identity at a level where this identity is directly threatened by non-Indian influences" (41).

Treva Michelle Pullan, writing about Skawennati's *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup>, states:

Skawennati's avatar bodies play out an Indigenous narrative that is decolonial in its reframing of the past and presentation of a vibrant future... In this sense, Skawennati performs decoloniality online and offers an invitation to other Indigenous artists to reclaim their bodies, identities and histories by occupying, exploring and embodying virtual spaces. The avatar body is evocative and emancipatory through its ability to delink from Western-centric histories and enter into a new temporality that is malleable, multiple and written by individuals. (248)

Using Pullan's idea, I argue that Skawennati's avatars in the virtual world give voice to the oppressed peoples of the real world. The realistic relationship between the female and male



avatars<sup>33</sup> coming from the present and future, as well as their relations with the past and their Aboriginal ancestors in the virtual environment, encourages viewers to make connections with the past and future within the material in order to reframe colonial history and create an online decolonized space that maps out the potential for Aboriginal sovereignty. Through digital storytelling, *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> acts as a counter-narrative against colonial oppression, and reconstructs the possibility of Aboriginal self-determination. Skawennati employs “the potential of machinima as a productive medium for First Nations creative and cultural expression” (LaPensée and Lewis 191) to subvert colonial representations and preserve traditional storytelling “as a living, evolving presence in the world” (193). Through a “transdisciplinarity” framework, Skawennati’s machinima project, which is “neither film nor art but a new hybrid media-medium” (Harwood 171), creates a unique genre contributing to “the realization of the imaginative experience” (Momaday 168). Rather than focusing solely on Aboriginal cultural survival, I argue that *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> is a “self-determined representation” focusing on thriving Aboriginal cultures. In this sense, *Time Traveller*<sup>TM</sup> acts as a catalyst in the establishment of the collective alliance among Aboriginal communities that can lead them towards sovereignty.

In conclusion, I argue that Aboriginal new media art is an effective medium to lead Aboriginal nations towards resurgence and decolonization because “[u]nlike more ‘traditional’ art mediums, such as painting or sculpture,” as Loft argues, “newer technology-based art including digital art, new media art, and web-based practices reside in an incredibly accessible and accessed realm” (“Aboriginal media art” 94). As the contemporary world heads progressively towards a digital social environment, Aboriginal peoples can use these technological resources in order to thrive in the digital age. Skawennati’s new media performances, in this regard, are

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<sup>33</sup> A romantic relationship is created between Hunter and Karakehawei (episode 6 and 8), and this relationship is reinforced in the last episode by Karakehawei’s traveling to the future and living with Hunter in 2121.

powerful tools of resurgence and sovereignty as they adapt Aboriginal storytelling and traditional knowledge to contemporary modern experience. Her digital projects, in Gaertner terms, “create meaningful lives for indigenous people in cyberspace, remediating cultural practices and challenging the ways in which we think of cyberspace in relation to land” (56). Skawennati’s visual artworks demonstrate that new media technologies are “utopian projections” (Tuer, *Mining the Media Archive* 6) that ensure the presence of Aboriginal peoples and their cultures in the future. Contrary to Loretta Todd’s early argument that modern technologies are “re-enactments of Western cultural consciousness” (Todd 162), cyberspace, in Skawennati’s digital projects, becomes the enactment of Aboriginal subjectivity and sovereignty. Through the indigenization of the virtual world, Skawennati transforms cyberspace into a site of positive cultural representation. Her works simultaneously contribute to subverting colonial stereotypical representations and reconstructing Aboriginal self-governance. Skawennati’s digital productions ultimately represent a “process in liberation *from* colonization as well as liberation *toward* a new reality where Indigenous life, according to Indigenous terms, is affirmed and recreated” (Christine Sy 185).

## **Conclusion:**

### **Honouring the Past, Thriving in the Future**

“We needed to maintain control over our land and resources by any means necessary, be they colonial or not. We continued to live with the legacy of our own history, languages, rituals, politics, and social values, which were often present in the living strata of our creative culture, whether it be in a piece of pottery or a work of new media art.”

Rayan Rice, “Presence and Absence Redux” 44

Aboriginal nations on Turtle Island were once marginalized by having their voices deliberately silenced under the auspices of colonial policies. They have been, at once, both “inside yet outside” of Canadian society (Young 2). Rayan Rice, in “Presence and Absence Redux: Indian Art in the 1990s,” discusses this forced marginalization and its direct impacts on Aboriginal art and artists:

[W]e were still marginalized as ‘Others’: not Western, not Canadian, not American, simply NOT. Our marginalization, which relegated us to the periphery of the art world, indicted that our work was not comprehensible, not up to their standards, or not aesthetically pleasing or valid to those who judged and occupied positions of power. ... Our practices were constantly being measured according to the criteria of authenticity, ethnography, and Western art theory. Art institutions struggled to see our lived reality, and either placed us in the museological context of an imagined ‘authentic’ past, or relegated us to the role of contemporary art’s ‘Other.’” (43-4)

Aboriginal art has been interpreted, manipulated, and stereotyped by settler colonialism through such mechanisms of othering. Through the colonial ethnographic framework, Aboriginal art was

transferred to museums and Aboriginal presence was intentionally confined to the past. However, from the 1970s onwards Aboriginal artists, through a subaltern perspective, have regained their voices against colonialism. Aboriginal artists have employed their work as vehicles for hopeful political, social, and cultural changes. Their postcolonial<sup>34</sup> reassessments of history represent the society “from the other side of the photograph” (Young 2). Aboriginal artistic and cultural productions contribute to the reduction of colonial assumptions about Aboriginal peoples and the construction of Aboriginal identity from settler positions. In addition to challenging stereotypical images imposed by settler colonialism, Aboriginal artworks raise awareness about Aboriginal presence and help Aboriginal peoples develop the resilience required to reconstruct their self-identity. Aboriginal artists express, borrowing from McMaster’s words, “a desire to shift the perspective from colonizer to colonized, claiming power over ways of seeing and representing” (“Under Indigenous Eyes” 66). Aboriginal art, in this regard, functions as a significant medium in the process of self-determination and decolonization by unfolding “the truth about stories” and creating new narratives in the Canadian collective memory.

In this thesis, I have undertaken a textual analysis of visual productions by three contemporary Aboriginal artists including Jordan Abel, Rebecca Belmore, and Skawennati. I have examined the role of contemporary Aboriginal art in the process of resistance, resurgence, and sovereignty leading towards the rebuilding of cultural identity within Turtle Island. In taking an interdisciplinary approach to Aboriginal art, I have investigated how recurrent and creative practices in conceptual writing, performance, and new media act as powerful frameworks to re-

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<sup>34</sup> Postcolonial theories valorize the perspectives from below. “Since the early 1980s,” as Robert J. C. Young asserts, “postcolonialism has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed” (2). Young continues that “postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last. Postcolonialism claims the right of all people on this earth to the same material and cultural well-being” (2).

imagine Aboriginal cultures and re-envision Aboriginal sovereignty. Abel's, Belmore's, and Skawennati's productions are, in my opinion, innovative and performative socio-political and cultural practices that generate critical debates around self-reflexive acts of recognition and revitalization of Aboriginal cultural knowledge. The artists I have studied use traditional stories to contest hegemonic culture in order to re-create past, present, and future Aboriginal identities. By reverting to the past and restoring traditional Aboriginal knowledge, these artists destabilize official Western history and unfold the forgotten or hidden stories that underline Canadian collective identity. Robert Yazzi argues that Aboriginal "postcolonial existence" resides in their traditions:

[T]he lesson is that we, as Indigenous peoples, must start within. We must exercise internal sovereignty, which is nothing more than taking control of our personal lives, our families, our clans, and our communities. To do that, we must return to our traditions, because they speak to right relationships, respect, solidarity, and survival... That is our path to postcolonial existence. (47)

Aboriginal artists, including those that I have examined here, apply the transformative power of traditional oral stories "as a source of strength, an emergent consciousness, and a foundation for collective action" (Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* 146). In doing so, they reinforce the collective power of Aboriginal resistance to a practice of decolonization. Self-recognition through art, from an Aboriginal perspective, has become a significant practice for Aboriginal resurgence in order to undermine colonial authority. Abel, Belmore, and Skawennati can be considered as "cultural warriors" (Nanibush, "Love and Other Resisance" 191) who create inventive frameworks in Aboriginal knowledge transmission and cultural preservation. Their artworks are both catalysts and contributors to the process of decolonization by disrupting dominant narratives, indigenizing contemporary paradigms, and envisioning a sovereign future

for Aboriginal communities. Using the theoretical framework of Aboriginal decolonizing methodologies, I have examined how the visual productions by my selected artists move fluidly among various media to perform traditional storytelling and take important steps towards Aboriginal recognition and sovereignty. The combination of literature, art, and new media technologies with traditional Aboriginal storytelling provides spaces for generating creative platforms for both healing and decolonization.

The first chapter of my work concerned the re-appropriation of Aboriginal cultures through erasure poetry by Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel. Inspired by his Nisga'a ancestors, Abel's strategy of erasure engages with colonial texts in order to create new meanings. Abel's textual interventions seek to condemn colonial policies of ignorance and Aboriginal erasure and bring an alternative perspective on Aboriginal art and culture, in stark contrast to colonial anthropological discourses. His re-examination of colonial anthropological history contributes to both undermining colonial assumptions and misrepresentations and regenerating Aboriginal arts and cultures. Although Abel employs settler colonial texts and words, he exploits a profound disjunction within the asymmetrical relationships between his poems and the Western colonial source texts he uses. Rather than recovering or affirming colonial narratives, Abel's works are creative iterations that contribute to reclaiming Aboriginal cultures to re-assert Aboriginal identity. In this regard, Abel's appropriation-based poems can be considered a form of anti-colonial activism for indigenizing colonial voices and restoring Aboriginal art and knowledge.

In the second chapter, dealing with Rebecca Belmore's performances, I have underlined how colonial policies of assimilation and appropriation are not limited to the nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries, and that the impact of such strategies is still visible among Aboriginal nations. "Belmore's performance art[.]" in Goeman's words, "foregrounds neocolonial relations in Canada, contradicting Canada's self-image as a benevolent liberal democracy" ("Introduction

to Indigenous Performances” 11). By allowing her body to undergo painful experiences, Belmore performs the racial, social, political, and cultural injustices endured by Aboriginal peoples. Her body transforms into a medium through which Belmore protests colonial violence and discrimination imposed on Aboriginal communities. Belmore’s re-enactments of history remind viewers that Aboriginal peoples have existed in the margins and will continue to defy ongoing settler-colonialism. Doris Sommer, a non-Aboriginal scholar whose “Not Just a Personal Story” focuses on the aesthetics of minority literature asserts that “testifying is always a public event” and its main purpose is to “represent the ‘people’ as agents of their own history” (114-5). Sommer argues that “[t]he singular [story] represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole...[S/he is] a lateral identification among ‘us’ as components of the whole” (108-9). Belmore enacts her marginalized stories to accentuate the presence of the groups of peoples deliberately excluded from public spaces in order to make them visible. As an activist artist, her performances establish dynamic spaces to address others and give voice to Aboriginal peoples. By presenting her performances in public sites, Belmore emphasizes the participation of non-Aboriginal peoples in the process of decolonization. She invites the audience to witness the atrocities committed against Aboriginal nations and support survivors in the journey of healing and reconstruction. Belmore’s installations, and all Aboriginal women’s performances in particular, can be situated in the central place of agency to bring about social change.

In the third chapter, by examining Skawennati’s new media projects, I have engaged with the representation of possible futures for Aboriginal communities. Skawennati’s digital artworks provide space for Aboriginal peoples to represent themselves and proclaim their identity in their own voices. Cyberspace acts as a powerful medium for Skawennati to construct a positive self-image of successful Aboriginal peoples by re-establishing a connection between Aboriginal

communities and envisioning their sovereignty in the future. Skawennati employs network-based communications to connect Aboriginal communities, knowledge, and stories both locally and internationally. Skawennati's cultural productions, by highlighting the presence of Aboriginal peoples in the present as well as imagining a self-determined and sovereign future, reinforce collective Aboriginal power and encourage nations to transfer this virtual and digital sovereignty to the real and physical world.

In sum, Abel's, Belmore's, and Skawennati's visual landscapes reveal who Aboriginal peoples were, who they are, and who they will be in the future, by returning to the past and revitalizing Aboriginal oral hi/stories as well as generating new stories from an Aboriginal perspective and challenging colonial history. Their works act as inter-generational connectors between the past and future generations. Traditional stories, as Sium and Ritskes argue, "work to not only regenerate Indigenous traditions and knowledge production, but also work against the colonial epistemic frame to subvert and recreate possibilities and spaces for resistance" (III). By combining traditional stories and art within contemporary frameworks, the visual productions created by these artists challenge the predominant Eurocentric interpretations of Aboriginal knowledge, art, and traditions and provide new venues for resistance and decolonization. Abel's, Belmore's, and Skawennati's "self-reflexive revitalization" criticize and reject all existing forms of representations as "political recognition" (Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks* 156). "State-recognized" ways of living, in Den Ouden's and O'Brien's words, especially those "geared towards perpetual denial" (218), force individuals to live under the shadow of colonialism itself, and contributes to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples as vanished nations, the decontextualization of Aboriginal art and cultures, and the eradication of their self-determination. Aboriginal resurgence and sovereignty need the presence of Aboriginal voices to represent their



history and worldview. This is what Robert Yazzie calls “internal sovereignty” (47). Yazzie states:

‘Sovereignty’ is nothing more than the ability of a group of people to make their own decisions and control their own lives... Postcolonialism will not arrive for Indigenous peoples until they are able to make their own decisions. Colonialism remains when national legislatures and policy makers make decisions for Indigenous peoples, tell them what they can and cannot do, refuse to support them, or effectively shut them out of the process. (46)

Sovereignty, in this definition, is the social act of articulating traditional knowledge and culture from an Aboriginal perspective. It is a process of epistemological and cultural reclamation rooted in the reproduction of the traditional practice of storytelling to reconstruct a self-determined Aboriginal identity.

Borrowing from Jessica Deer’s idea about using traditional “Indian” costumes to counter “the lingering effects of colonization” and restore Aboriginal culture and identity, I argue that Abel’s, Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s performative activism “plant[s] a seed in the consciousness of more Canadians about cultural appropriation, Indigenous representations, and identity” (61). Their visual artworks underline the realization that reconciliation and self-determination depends on historical and cultural self-representation. By revitalizing traditional knowledge, the artists regenerate Aboriginal cultural and social identity, which is in opposition to colonial representations. Stuart Hall states that identity is “the process of identification[.]” which means that rather than having already determined realities, identities are the result of cultural and social experiences (47). From this point of view, in hybrid communities, the reconstruction of marginal groups’ identities needs the “recovery” of lost and untold stories (Hall 52). By the same token, Aleida Assmann, in “Memory, Individual and Collective,” engages with the connectedness

between personal and collective memories and argues that “the resurgence of frozen memories” has the power to change the political frameworks and create “the new basis for history and memory” (210). Based on Hall’s and Assmann’s theories, I argue that, through the act of self-representation, Abel, Belmore, and Skawennati transform art into a site of survival and cultural evolution. Their lived experiences and individual stories can be considered as “the dynamic medium for processing subjective experience and building up a social identity” (Assmann 213). The artists’ re-representation of the past hi/stories bring about a change in the political and archival memory of Canada, and play an important role in re-creating Canadian collective memory. Abel’s, Belmore’s, and Skawennati’s artworks, and by extension all art made and represented by Aboriginal communities, act as catalysts in the journey of re-creation and re-identification of Aboriginal identities. Their individual works contribute to redefining Aboriginal cultural and collective identities. Although usually created by individual artists, Aboriginal art productions are cultural expressions contributing to the revitalization of Aboriginal knowledge to enhance the collective power of Aboriginal peoples to self-determine their future. Political Aboriginal art practices penetrate to hidden layers of history and inject alternative meanings into Canadian cultural memory.

Given that “settler colonialism is a structure and not an event” (Tuck and Yang 5), decolonization is an ongoing process that needs collective fortitude, constancy, and stability. In the post-colonial era, Aboriginal peoples are challenged to witness new forms of appropriation and dispossession. “Decolonization,” as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin state “is the process of revealing and dismantling colonialist power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonialist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved” (63). Decolonization for Aboriginal peoples means using cultural representations to regain their ability to self-determine their future.

Contemporary Aboriginal art is a dynamic platform of creative interventionist and disruptive practices contributing to the restoration of Aboriginal knowledge and re-imagination of Aboriginal freedom and sovereignty. Although many questions remain unresolved about the present and future status of Aboriginal peoples, one cannot deny that the ongoing resistance by Aboriginal artists/activists in constructing hopeful and sovereign futures for Aboriginal communities is a positive step in this direction. Art activism continues to encompass aspiration and achievement. “For Indigenous nations to live,” as Coulthard argues, “capitalism must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it” (*Red Skin, White Masks* 173).

My thesis has focused on contemporary Aboriginal artists who have undertaken projects to regain their lost identities and self-determination. By engaging with Aboriginal art as a powerful decolonial praxis, it is my hope that this thesis contributes to filling a gap in contemporary academic criticism of Aboriginal artistic activism and open the door for future researchers to write their own stories. My goal is to generate more questions about Aboriginal art activism and cultural memory in order to expand in-depth studies on the centralization of Aboriginal voices and perspectives in the process of recognition and reconciliation that leads towards envisioning sovereign communities in the future.

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